

# IN THE WEST COUNTRY





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IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

VOL. III.



# IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

BY

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“QUEENIE,” “ORANGE LILY,” “A JEWEL OF A GIRL,”

“MY LOVE, SHE’S BUT A LASSIE,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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## IN THE WEST COUNTRY.

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### CHAPTER I.

TWO days later, rather early, as I sat alone in the morning-room, a visitor was announced. I did not catch the name, so next moment my work fell from my hands with surprise; for instead of one of the neighbouring squires come over to see Sir Dudley about foxes or poachers, there entered—here, so far from London, or the dear west country, far even from a railroad station—none other than Fulke Bracy.

‘I am so glad to meet you again,’ he said,

coming forward with the same firm, upright bearing and kindly face I knew so well. 'But I cannot say how sorry I was for you when . . .'

His hand had closed on mine while he spoke. There it stayed as our eyes met, and so for how long a space of time perhaps neither of us knew—we stood silently looking at each other. It was very strange to me afterwards, thinking over it. The only explanation I could give to myself being that we *understood* each other; and that in the meeting of our eyes and clasp of our hands, all that Fulke Bracy could say of sorrow or sympathy for my father's death, and all our troubles, was expressed more fully than even in words; and was accepted and answered by me in a like spirit of reverent, hushed sorrow and with touched gratitude.

When next my friend spoke, it was to say :

‘ But the person I have really come to see here is your eldest brother, although I thought and hoped you might be at Broadhams, too. I have some business with him—may I tell you what it is ? ’

What he told me was, even in my sorrow, such a gladdening idea, like a glinting of sunlight through a dark rain-shower, that though I gave a little sob it was with a cry of delight.

Then he went away ; following a footman who came to say Mr. Beaumanoir Brown was outside in the pleasure-grounds with Sir Dudley. He whispered, as he wrung my hand in farewell, evidently with inner excitement : ‘ Don’t say to any one, please, that I spoke to you first on this subject.’

He had hardly gone before Alice came flying in, followed very gravely by our mother.

‘Pleasance, be quick! What has he come for—to stay? Oh, we must make him stay; how delightful! The house won’t be like a convent-cell any longer.

‘To stay!—*now*, in a time of such deep mourning!’ echoed my mother, very low, in deep emotion. This was evidently why she had followed Alice; for, even putting aside her own great grief that shrank from the sight of strangers, her mind was so imbued with the now somewhat old-fashioned ideas of a long mourning in utter seclusion respectfully due to the memory of the dead, that it was sacrilege in her eyes to violate the least of these rules in even the least degree.

But, just because she *could* not speak louder at that moment, Alice either heard not or heeded not.

‘What has he come for, I say? To see

Beau on business? . . . But what is it about?’

‘That I don’t—that I really cannot tell you,’ I replied.

‘Very odd. And how long is it since he came?’

‘About ten minutes—or a quarter of an hour. Really, I hardly know,’ I answered, blushing guiltily, as my conscious eyes sought the clock and saw the latter part of my assertion confirmed.

Lady Digges stamped her little high-heeled shoe on the ground. ‘And you dare to tell me that you kept my visitor, in my own house, to yourself all this time—and never sent to let me know!’ she cried; then pale with passion went on breathless and witheringly: ‘But I might have expected as much, after your disgraceful behaviour before with

him here ; trying to entrap him into clandestine meetings *he* never made. Pray be quiet—cease your excuses !’—as utterly confounded and feeling, indeed, somewhat to blame, I began stammering apologies and explanations.

‘ *Where* is he now ? That is all I ask you.’

‘ Outside, in the grounds somewhere near, with Beau and Sir Dudley, I believe.’

‘ Thank you. That is all I want to know from you. If you had been a stranger, instead of my sister, you would never have dared so to presume upon my good-nature. But I am utterly sick of girls and their ways. Please goodness, I’ll have nothing more to do with any of you henceforth ! It is only with married women that one can have any fun, in peace, without being worried.’

She went out of the room in a light whirl-

wind of eagerness and anger. Left alone together, my mother looked at me rather aghast; not comprehending it all.

‘What is the matter, Pleasance? I must insist on an explanation.’

I felt a ‘vast disposition’ to weep, but refrained. What could I say? . . .

There was nothing to be explained. ‘Only Alice was always unkind to me about Mr. Bracy if ever he talked to me, or walked with me, or—we did anything together. . . . She called him her friend. She liked him to be always with herself.’

My mother’s face grew severe.

‘Pleasance! you forget yourself. It is going too far, even in your anger, to suppose that Alice, *my daughter*, and a married woman, could prefer the society of any gentleman to that of her own husband.’

A married woman ! Almost the same tone in which Alice had assumed infallibility for those in that state. It struck me so bitterly that I laughed in my own heart ; wondering whether the fact of a plain gold hoop-ring and vows made heedlessly at the altar, and uncared for since, could alter and exalt a woman's nature suddenly so much above that of her former mere spinsterhood.

But I was sorry for my mother, too. She had now no ambition more for herself in life ; had centred all that remained in her children. It *was* hard to see her secret hopes so dashed that Alice would undertake the charge of Rose or myself in future.

Some quiet tears did rise now ; for the late scene had pained me very much, and I thought my mother would not notice them.

But she said softly in a broken voice :  
' Pray don't, my dear—I have never seen *you* cry before but once ! Alice was too hasty with you, certainly, but it distresses me to see you so unhappy. You used to seem always so contented and cheerful, as your father said—though you were often too quiet even then, I thought. We all seem changed.'

We were so, indeed. My mother had never hitherto in mortal sight laid aside her gentle armour of calm self-control, sometimes icy in its exquisite perfection. I had never let her see the depths of my nature for woe ; the nature she thought so serenely commonplace, so happily Brown. And again she had never seen any fault before in Alice, whose light fickle moods, now tears now laughter, had all been Beaumanoir qualities.

Presently the latter came hurriedly in,

wrapped in a fur cloak and wearing one of Beau's hats in which she looked very pretty. Just then, by assuming brightness, I had again consoled my mother.

'I can't find them anywhere, though I snatched up these things in the hall and ran out as quick as I could,' she exclaimed disconsolately. Next moment, as a figure came along the broad terrace outside the windows, 'Why—there is Beau, I declare.'

At her eager call, the said individual nonchalantly stepped through the window which she hastily opened for him. 'Make haste, Beau, do! You are so slow, and ugh, the outside air is so cold!'

'*You* seem in somewhat of a hurry,' blandly replied our elder brother. 'What may your Ladyship be pleased to want with me?'

‘Where is Mr. Bracy gone?—and what *was* his business with you?’

‘He is gone either to the devil, or to see Sir Dudley. I beg your pardon, my dear Alice, for seeming to assume any comparison between the two personages,’ drawled Beau: then his face hardened curiously, and his voice took a sarcastic ring. ‘As to his business with me, it has not prospered, I am—happy to state. It was nothing less, deuce take the fellow’s impudence! than that he wanted *to buy back Stoke!*’

‘And what did you say?’ ejaculated Alice, amazed.

‘I said, I’d be d—d if he did!’ responded our handsome elder brother, with quite a savage look of anger, languid though he generally was in temper.

An outcry came from all three of us.

‘Beau! how could you be so unkind?’ from Alice and myself. And, ‘Beau!—I am glad you refused him!’ from my mother.

We women turned and all looked at each other, then flushed—for even my mother’s pale cheeks had taken a softly pink tinge, breathless with the warm thought in our hearts at a question that involved the fate of our dear house in the West.

Alice burst out in hot ejaculations of her own friendship for Mr. Bracy, and Beau’s brotherly ingratitude to herself, incoherently expressed. Plainly the question was purely personal with her; she wished to please Fulke that he might be the more pleased with herself. To me, it seemed almost as if Stoke was a living portion of earth that was being cruelly withheld from one who had long loved it, as had his ancestors who had been

reared on its broad acres. Mother's flash of bitterness had been the mere maternal instinct of sharing her son's feelings entirely ; divining that the thought of having to give up his beautiful home and position as a country gentleman to the very man whose family *we* had supplanted, was gall to him.

She had guessed him rightly, though quietly folding her hands she did not say another word ; as if reminding herself that Beau was now the owner, the family representative (surely embodying to her that of Beaumanoir rather than our broken Brown stem) ; and as she had always blindly worshipped the future heir in her eldest-born, so now she was prepared to accept his will as her law.

But disregarding Alice's angry expostulations and questions showered upon him, likewise my lower but far more earnest pleadings

and soft persuasions, Beau turned on his heel with a gesture as if he shook us from him : ‘ I tell you both again—and once for all !—that I never liked your dear friend, Mr. Bracy ; and rather than have him in my shoes, I would sell Stoke for five thousand less to this retired Jew tailor who wrote to me yesterday. What do I care about the mere money ? ’—magnificently. ‘ However, we are really exciting ourselves most unnecessarily ’—his drawl denoted very little excitement—‘ for after Mrs. Jessop’s letter to me yesterday, I shall promise to let her have the first chance of Stoke. Wants it on her marriage with Clair very likely.’

‘ *Mrs. Jessop !* You would not surely rather sell our old home to her, instead of to the man whose forefathers owned it and loved it and lived on it since the old Saxon days ! ’ I

uttered, my eyes blazing, and feeling the wish to burn each word in my indignation and anger into his memory.

‘Certainly!—Do pray, my dear Pleasance, oblige me by no more words on this unpleasant subject, if you are to make your home with me henceforth.’ Therewith Beau left the room with the most bland superior air imaginable; stopping to deliver a Parthian shaft at the door with a wickedly easy smile. ‘By the way, Alice, what a lady-killer your friend seems to be!—Pleasance seems dangerously smitten in that quarter, eh?’

Not heeding his careless taunt, I hastily left the room, hurrying away from them all, with only a blind feeling that I must be alone. Down a long ground-floor corridor was the chapel, once used for weekly services

in former days, now I believed never visited by any one save myself, who since coming this last time to Broadhams had found out and learnt to love this retreat.

Here, alone, and safe from all likely intrusion, I sank down on a pile of hassocks and covered my face.

Mrs. Jessop—perhaps Clair St. Leger's *wife*—that odious woman at dear Stoke! It seemed all too much to bear,—too much!

## CHAPTER II.

IT was so still and peaceful in the little chapel. The storied panes of the stained windows high overhead, illumined with glowing colour and rich with tracery, suggested thoughts of beauty and holiness, far different from the dull view of the Broadhams demesne outside. It was a fit home of purposeless lives spent therein in fat content.

I may have sat there half-an-hour, perfectly still now, after the first upheavings of bitter emotion and disappointment had subsided. The sacred associations of the place had stolen into my being and brought peace there.

To this last coming trial, as to those now past, I once more said, 'What is the use of fretting or raving against the fates, the circumstances, that press down like great forces shaping our lives against our desires? Only be still, be resigned! The weight of the burden is already lightened by half, once it is no longer struggled under. . . With men this may be more difficult. Thank God, that women, whose task is to suffer more and silently in this world, have the larger share of resignation given to their natures.'

Presently a low sigh from out of the stillness fell on my ear. I was hidden from sight behind a lectern, which was also piled with coverings against possible dust; for who ever came here to pray now but myself, and that unknown?

Another sigh—a murmured word or two as if of intercession. I started! . . . It was my mother, kneeling a little way from me on a *prie-dieu* chair.

At the slight rustle I made in rising to look, she raised her head and met my startled eyes. Then, after a moment or two of stillness and perhaps resumed self-control, she made me a sign. I stole to her side as if the place wherein we were was verily sacred ground to us both, and that not in unmeaning words.

For a while my mother said nothing. She stroked my hair once and again, as seating herself, with the gentle superior tranquillity of old, though softened now, she drew me down on a hassock at her feet.

That caress was much, very much from her. Nevertheless, it was not the silence

of perfect understanding passing speech: our natures were perhaps too different. But it meant closer union arising from the rest of mind we had both found in the chapel.

After a little, we both spoke in broken whispers; then feeling chastened yet comforted agreed to go back, lest the others of our little outer world might wonder at our absence.

A long suite of reception-rooms opened one out of another from the chapel till they ended in the morning-room. Through these we now returned, to avoid the direct long corridor, where our presence might have seemed strange. We went in silence down the great rooms, the walls heavy with pictures in floriated Italian frames, the tables inlaid with beautiful mosaics, forbidding use, the

splendid settees and vast arm-chairs, silently demanding no happy family party, but a magnificent assemblage,—a throng of gorgeously-dressed, highly-titled visitors.

So, going softly, as became two women who had been in spirit on the high hills and solitary places of prayer, we entered the small writing-room which was separated only by curtains from the morning-room. (The same little room in which my unlucky note to Clair St. Leger had once been written.) A subdued murmur of voices came from the room beyond—then a woman's sobs.

We both stopped short. Alice's voice was heard exclaiming in vehement tearful reproach :

‘ You don't care for me any more ! Oh, I see it ; I know it—I am miserable about

it. And it is Pleasance, my sister, who has come between us. Ever since she came here, last winter, you have only eyes for *her* . . .’

My mother caught my wrist hard, and transfixed me with an aghast look, utterly bewildered. Then another voice answered, deep and troubled it seemed, but stern.

‘Do not let your sister’s name be mentioned between us in this way ever again ! You have still, to the full, all the ordinary friendship that ever subsisted between us, Lady Digges, but whatever regard I may have for *her* is not to be discussed. She is too good and pure—it seems desecration.’

The blood in my veins seemed swelling to painfulness ; my heart was beating ; for even before hearing those well-known tones, I knew, as my mother did not, that the other

person inside there was not Sir Dudley. And the disgrace of overhearing it all . . . !

‘Good and pure!’ sneered Alice, bitterly laughing. Yes. She was in love with Mr. St. Leger all the time, and yet she was designing enough to try and entrap you too. She did not care for you—I *did*! I am not happy here, whatever you may preach to me. I am miserable,’ . . . and she sobbed afresh, in one of the lightly-come, gusty passions we knew so well of old.

Oh Alice, Alice !

‘Good heavens, Lady Digges, this is a most painful conversation. Good-bye—for-give me for seeming abrupt, and I thank you heartily for all your kind hospitality ; but—but I have to catch my train, and must thank Sir Dudley first for having been as good a friend to me as yourself. . . When

next we meet, may you be very happy,—good-bye.’

A door closed: he was gone. Sometimes perhaps the bravest thing a man can do is to run away. Next instant, Alice, rushing from the spot, pushed back the curtains of the little room—and found my mother and me like two statues, transfixed.

The scene that followed was terrible to me then, is painful to me still in memory. We two stood as if guilty, before the infuriated woman for whom was our shame and sorrow.

Our poor Alice had always been giddy-headed, as easily roused to tears or laughter as a vane is blown about by every breeze. Now she was wrought upon by such a variety of conflicting feelings as to seem beside herself. Even our very presence there hardly seemed to surprise her, so hastily she grasped

the opportunity for pouring forth denunciations and railings on my head. Words, words, words!—as unreasonable, as unfounded, as those she had uttered against me before; not one whose point could prick my conscience, that was strong in innocence, but still I bent before the shower of hurtling arrows. Then my mother stood forward to protect me by interposing her authority. In vain. She had always suffered Alice, as if in play, to turn aside the gentle power to which the rest of us had bent; now it was disregarded in earnest. With her face very pale and hands trembling, but still in a firm voice, the mother rebuked, besought, reminded her daughter of her position, the duties she owed to her husband—as a mother might.

Alice turned upon her in withering scorn. ‘Duties, duties! You never talked about

them to me *before* I was married!—pray leave me now to settle all that with my husband for myself. Did you ever tell me of anything then beyond Sir Dudley's fortune and position?'

'Alice, Alice, my child, indeed I did, but you would not listen . . .'

With a well-known gesture, my sister put up both hands to her ears; a pretty trick she had no doubt practised when the warning admonition was given.

'It is all your doing—yours!' and she stamped her foot on the ground. 'You would have me marry him, and now I am tired of my life and miserable, and have you to thank for it.'

'Alice, for pity's sake, for shame's sake, be quiet,' I expostulated, helping my mother, who had turned deadly pale, into a chair.

For the first and last, the only time in my life, I spoke in anger to my elder sister, and that with my whole soul. ‘*It was your own doing.* Though I am younger than you, I warned you last year when you were engaged, but you would not listen to me. Now, if you wish to live as a good and true woman, there is nothing left for you but to bear your burden in silence.’

Alice looked at me, perfectly silenced a few moments.

‘Yes; you are my younger sister, and this is my house. As you have dared to plot against me with your friend Mr. Bracy, to play the spy and now to insult me to my face, I never wish to listen to you again as long as I live. The sooner you leave Broadhams, the better, I think.’

Saying this with a freezing air of suddenly-

assumed dignity, that would have been a laughable turning of the tables if it had not been so terribly real to us, she walked out of the room. She never gave one backward glance at my mother's almost fainting figure, at my pitiful appeal; as, with one arm outstretched after her, with the other I supported the poor head that was bowed by the ingratitude of a favourite child.

Ah, Alice!—had all your light laughing ways and soulless quick angers, which we used to think as pretty as the passing tempers of a child, come to this?

That evening, as a yellow sinking sunlight was making Broadhams look almost cheerful, my mother said to me finally in her own room :

‘ Yes, dear ; you have been a great comfort to me to-day, Pleasance. It is best we should

go away from here. Then perhaps Alice will feel sorry . . .’ My mother’s still luminous eyes, once so bright, were rimmed red with weeping, her face was very pale, but the features set with a hardness of sorrowful dignity never noticeable there before. To make Alice sorry ! How little she could have believed in such a wish but a short time ago. She went on low and broken-voiced : ‘ As Beau says he hopes to make a fortune by turning artist, I must make a home for him in London. I cannot desert my poor boy, for I fear’ (speaking even lower) ‘ that with his fine prospects so lately destroyed he will become wild and ruin himself. For you and Rose, dear, I *had* hoped you would both have been happy with Alice, but now . . .’

‘ We should be far more really happy on

crusts with you, mother. Here it would never have been home.'

'But we are almost beggars, dear child. I never told you the worst before, hoping it was not necessary, but the bare truth is, I can hardly support one more besides Beau on my own poor little fortune, which is all left—and your Aunt Bee has already adopted poor Bob.' . . . Then after a pause, with a humble tone, so new it was infinitely touching: 'Could not you, dear, accept your god-mother's invitation? It came down after the funeral, I remember, and you seemed to put away the idea with distaste at the time; but now . . .'

For dear Mrs. Gladman had written, on hearing of our ruined fortunes, to offer me a home, for as soon and as long as ever I would accept it.

‘Oh, mother, I love her really and very dearly, too,’ I murmured; ‘but—but if I went there, there is another person in the house . . .’

‘Who?’ she asked, struck by my hesitating manner.

‘John Gladman is—I mean—he is not . . . I do like him very much indeed; but still I never could like him well enough—or not at all *in that way*,’ I stammered, blushing.

‘John Gladman! Did *he* think he could have you then?’ uttered my mother in a tone of half-contemptuous surprise; then more slowly, after a few moments of reflection, murmured: ‘Well . . . after all—he has a fair enough income for a country gentleman, and they are of an old family.’

‘Oh, mother! as if that was everything.’

My mother started, then with a quivering voice:

‘Perhaps you are right. At least, henceforth, I will never help in settling any marriage again, that no more of my children may have to reproach me. As to this, I will not press you, child; your Aunt Bee and I will do what we can between us (she is always faithful to me); and meanwhile Rose shall go to Mrs. Gladman till this fancy of the young man has blown over. In a few months I hope to be able to afford keeping my daughters with myself; meanwhile, poor though we are, *I will not stay on here.* . . . Now leave me, dear. Yes, I wish to be alone,—it is best for me.’

So I went away reluctantly, leaving her proud and gentle spirit solitary, and stricken by the sharpest pang—that inflicted by a favourite child.

As I passed through the round gallery, on

the way to my own room, I heard Alice's laugh suddenly ringing out below—a laugh so carelessly happy and childish, it seemed as if she was not conscious of having given a moment's pain to any one. I looked over the balustrade; and there in the hall below she stood with Sir John Dudgeon, who had ridden over from a neighbouring house where he was staying.

## CHAPTER III.

MARCH ! The bitter sting of winter has vanished from the air, though it is a cool evening. The daffodils are out in pale yellow glory under the hedgerows. The rooks are cawing on their homeward ways. There are plaintive baas of tender lambkins to be heard from the close behind the orchard, and bigger lambs are frisking down in the open meadow.

On this especial March evening, I was rather slowly dragging my tired and muddy-booted feet along the edge of a ploughed field, belonging to the Barn farm ; for I was staying

with my grand-aunt. Bee herself was ahead of me, quite active though bent very much. 'How do you think this mangold looks?' she was calling out sharply to a third individual. Which latter, seemingly as much interested as herself in the growth of the mangolds, went plunging into the sticky wet furrows, and reporting progress in a cheery voice. Said the individual then, coming up to me, with kindly interest (as if my likings or distastes could matter to any one now !):

'You don't care much for merely walking over a farm, Miss Pleasance? You like fields and woods in summer better.'

'I used to like going round the farm at home—at Stoke, Mr. Bracy. But then that was with my father.'

'Ah, yes. That makes all the difference

in the world, of interest or the want of it,' answered Fulke Bracy, for it was he, with such a friendly ring of sympathy in his voice that my heart ought to have warmed to him. But my heart did not feel able to warm to any one now. I looked at him, as if *from* the *outside*, at the outside. No inner light from the soul brightened my vision, though it was aware of meeting his all kindled by the kindly warmth in his good grey eyes. Yes, aware of it!—and duly grateful to him: that was all.

We were on the top of a ploughed hill; a cool clear sky free of clouds bent around us to the far, sharply-defined horizon. The brawling of a river could be heard on two sides as it skirted the hill, but it was hidden from view by a wood, through which rose up a thin—very thin grey smoke from the

chimneys of the Barn. Fires were not extravagantly kept up by day in Bee's family mansion. Every one was expected to be out of doors in the fresh air, while daylight lasted. In the evenings, we might burn all the timber on the place, or the house down, for aught my grand-aunt cared. Now she looked round at us in her keen way.

‘I'm going down to the cowhouses by the muddiest way there is, because it's nearest; and I want neither of you. I want to have a talk with Tozer.’ (Tozer was the steward, gardener, coachman, butler! on occasion, frequent opponent, and only too trusted *fidus Achates* of my grand-aunt.) ‘Later I must see what fresh mischief last night's spate has done at the bridge; you may wait for me there, or not, just as you both please. Now, Bracy—I can open the gate for myself!’

And therewith shaking a stout walking-stick defiantly at our male companion, who insisted all the same on unfastening a dangerously rickety gate, which was darned with thorn-bushes to make it do its difficult duty, Bee plunged down a very Slough of Despond between two hedges, and left us alone. (By the way, my grand-aunt had a trick of calling gentlemen by their surnames in a full-flavoured, old-fashioned way. It did not sound vulgar; only Addisonian.)

‘Well; shall we go down by the road to the bridge?’ I asked, rousing myself up to assume the part of agreeable hostess.

‘Whatever you like. Yes, certainly; I shall be very glad,’ replied the guest with a sort of abstracted air suddenly come to him, as if Bee had taken his wits off down the lane.

‘What a lovely drive this one must have

been !' observed the agreeable hostess, as we struck into the little park and came on the approach winding downwards to the Barn.

'I beg your pardon—yes ; very lovely.' The visitor seemed waking out of dreamland.

'But isn't it sad to see it in this neglected state ?'

'Oh yes, very sad ; very sad, indeed.'

If people answer like a dull echo at one's elbow, agreeable conversation is impossible ; best give it up ! The hostess vanished in an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, and only a slim, straight, yet dejected-feeling young person in heavy, black, winter garments, Pleasance Brown,—who once had never felt heavy or dejected !—went silently side by side with the abstracted guest.

The drive in question was so overgrown with grass, groundsel, and such-like useful

herbs in their own place, that in open parts its very existence was scarcely manifest ; elsewhere it was almost overspread by stretches of rhododendrons bordering it on either side, while higher above laburnums and lilacs made a dense coppice that would soon be a glory of tender spring colours.

This was the most used approach to the house, too : there were some fresh cart-ruts on it.

The other drive that wound by the brawling river, whose hoarse murmur we were now approaching, ended in a bridge of larch-poles and sods, and a roofless, cut stone lodge, with the Beaumanoir crest over the empty door : for the Baron's Stay (as was the pretty old name which had now degenerated vulgarly into the Barn), had always been the dower house of that family. Now, leaving the house

itself hidden by uncared-for shrubbery, we came by a wood path to the river, where a picturesque little scene opened out before us.

Around were great glossy-hued Portugal laurels, delicate acacias, and such-like foreign tree attendants outside an English country-house, bending across the rushing water to greet an abruptly rising background on the opposite bank. Between these hurried a brown, brawling brook, swollen with flood, flecked with foam, as it dashed like a living thing down among boulders, making here little flashing falls, and there big dark pools, all overhung with alder and willow.

Our path led up to where a bridge had once crossed boldly the noisy narrow torrent, but *now*—only two piers stood tantalizingly in the water, making one long to jump from each to each, to cross to the other side. It

was plainly not in yesternight's freshet that the old bridge had been swept away, for some grass grew on the pier-heads, and they had mouldered as low as the level of the road.

I sat down on one of the two large stones that had ended the bridge parapet, and resting there idly, looked down on the ivy-trails overhanging the water; and the gap below my feet where the bridge should have been; and at the hungry, dark, amber-coloured current, itself a constant delight.

Mr. Bracy did not sit down. He leant instead against the ruined wall, a foot or two from me, and dislodged little bits of mortar which he dropped with careless aim, but restlessly, into the still-closing water. Why could he not be still, like me? He used to be much pleasanter, when his lordly repose-

fulness of manner amused little Rose into sarcastic remarks behind his back at Broadhams ; and Alice would retort that he had the true *grand air*, the manner of the race of Vere de Vere. He first broke silence ; speaking low in a constrained tone as if more lay behind.

‘Where is your brother, Beaumanoir, now?’

‘He is supposed to be in London, where he wishes to live as an artist, you know ; but he is always going off for two or three days, as he can never stay still long. My mother wants to make a home for him, so she has taken a little house in Camden-Hill, with a studio at the back. Beau calls it the maternal dust-hole.’

‘You never used to speak so bitterly, Miss Pleasance.’

‘I never had occasion to feel so, Mr.

Bracy. Good heavens ! how my mother has devoted herself all her life long to my brother Beau—and what is the result ?’

‘ Those who worship cannot expect to be likewise the worshipped. Have you not found out that, yet ? As the French say, “ Il y a toujours l’un qui baise, et l’autre qui tend la joue.” But I cannot imagine any man who is not the *better*, at least, for a mother’s affection. Although he may not show much outward sign of returning it, still, depend upon it, he feels it.’

‘ Yes ? . . Yes ! How much worse might he not be, you mean, without that restraining influence ?’ I murmured ; and then there was renewed silence but for the babbling and here and there hoarse chiding of the brook below.

After a while I spoke again.

‘Mr. Bracy, I have been thinking a great deal lately. . .’

‘I have noticed that, ever since I came yesterday evening, lady fair. You have been thinking so much you have almost forgotten speech—towards an insignificant mortal like myself at least.’

‘I *am* so sorry’—(in a polite even tone that did not sound in the least truly and inwardly repentant, though outwardly apologetical). ‘But I should be so glad of your opinion, as to what I have been thinking about. What is to become of Bob?’

‘To become of him? What do you mean?—Have you to do his thinking as to his career?’

‘Yes, that is just it, Mr. Bracy. The dear old March Hare never could think for himself, so I must do it for him. He was always

meant for the army, by my mother, you know, and he always hated the idea. Now he says he can't go on with it, as his tutor was too expensive—and there is all his cramming wasted ! That is a dreadful thought to me.'

'I shouldn't let it distress you too much,' said Bracy drily. 'I fancy that in the words of the Psalmist, "the ploughers would have ploughed long furrows on his back ;" and I very much doubt whether all cramming is not wasted material. But are you really so anxious for your brother to go into a line regiment, and live in affluence on his magnificent pay ? He has perhaps some private means besides ?'

'Not one *brass farthing* !'—uttered as emphatically as if I had really ever seen with my own eyes any such base metal coin.

'Dear Bee always said she will leave him

this place, and he loves it. He loves it even better than Stoke, I think ; perhaps because he has looked forward to its being his—but what is that for a prospect ? ’ in a mournful tone.

‘ I should think it a very lovely prospect,’ looking round admiringly on woods, river, and the whole delightful early Spring scene. ‘ Only—it might cost something to put into order again.’

‘ That is it, Mr. Bracy. Don’t you see—you know Aunt Bee of old, and how things are, here. There is just enough to keep her own body and soul together, and no more. And Bob has a bigger body (I won’t say anything of the soul), and he eats more, of course, than she does, and drinks—though he only drinks beer ; while she takes spring water,’—turning off my melancholy discourse

with a little laugh. Then, still haunted by the subject, and tempted by his air of silent sympathy to disburthen my mind, I resumed : ‘ Bob talks of living happily as a farmer like John Gladman, but Wheatfield Farm is very differently managed. Poor fellow !—he says if only he had some capital he might manage to get things right here, for farming was always what he loved best. Aunt Bee has offered to give him up the reins, bless her dear old soul ! but she has no ready money ; and Tozer, as Bob says, is a regular old Turk who hates any change.’

Silence for some moments. Mr. Bracy seemed thinking, but about what I could not tell. Perhaps it might be that all this was no concern of his—and on this idea I spoke humbly.

‘ However, I ought not to trouble you with

my private worries. I am quite sorry—we ought each to bear our own burdens. Let us talk of something else.’

‘Not at all,’ responded Bracy, rousing briskly from his reverie. ‘I remember, Pleasance, if you do not, our agreement to be friends last summer. That gives me a certain amount of right to hear about your troubles; besides, I like the March Hare very much.’

I looked at him astonished. He had called me by my Christian name, evidently without knowing he did so; and not lightly either, but in an earnest, respectful tone. Clearly it was not for the first time, in his own mind.

Then, as I remained silent, he added in a rather forced voice, and flushing red—to my still greater surprise:

‘I wonder if Bob would take me for a partner. I have long thought there was a good deal to be made out of this farm and place. Lately I have been wanting greatly to have some country interests, and I could advance. . .’

‘A partner? Oh, no, no,’ my lips uttered almost dismayed in intense gratitude, but as strong refusal. ‘How good you are, Mr. Bracy; but such a thing is *impossible*! As well fling your money down there into the stream.’

‘Wait a moment. Hear me out first. During the many years I have visited here since a boy, it has been impossible not to see how your aunt has been—well, *robbed*! There seemed no use in telling her before, because she never cared for more than just enough—and seemed so happy in her ignor-

ance, it would have been cruel to enlighten her.'

'Do you mean—Tozer?' in bewilderment. Tozer was to my grand-aunt, that roc's egg treasure which so many solitary ladies believe themselves happy in possessing—a perfect factotum, an infallible, trusty, tyrannical serving-man.

'I do indeed mean old Tozer. It has been shameful; but—well hitherto, as you all seemed provided for, where was the use in speaking? But now Bob should see to it.'

'Thank you for telling me, Mr. Bracy. Poor Bob! he will not find it an easy task.'

'Which brings us back to our muttons,' responded my old friend, Mr. Fulke, with a curious subdued smile. 'As I said, I love the country; and even knowing I had a share

in a patch of it when up in London, would be a consolation. Another liking of mine is safe speculation, and, as I said, there is decidedly something to be made of the Barn ; therefore, if Bob will let me join him, I may feel pretty safe in advancing some capital on improvements, and we can divide our profits accordingly. Miss Pleasance, you shall see we shall make a small fortune out of it.'

This last was said with a prescient triumphant emphasis, that ought to have carried conviction straight home to my flutteringly happy yet irresolute heart. Ought I—could it be right to allow Fulke Bracy thus to put himself to possible loss for friendship's sake? And, yet, how refuse on my own responsibility such a splendid chance and generous offer for my best-beloved brother?

I fairly stammered in answering.

‘It is too good. But, as you say, you always did like dear Bob.’

‘Yes, so I did; but don’t mistake me, Miss Pleasance, I am offering him this because *you* asked me to help you in thinking for him.’

This was said slowly, and with a certain amount of weight that made its meaning unmistakeable; yet he was again looking down into the river with set features and unseeing grey eyes. Clair St. Leger while saying such a thing would have looked at me full with a laughing blue gaze, and noted every effect of his words in my conscious face.

‘Because *I* did—I am so sorry, then,’ I murmured.

‘Why so?’

Fulke this time turned round slowly, and looked at me straight.

‘Because you have laid a weight of obligation on my friendship, I can never repay.’

The moment the words were said I regretted them; would have given worlds to recall them. For I saw his reply in my old friend’s face, even before the answer came, quick and eager.

‘Don’t speak of obligation—don’t think of it as such! I was wrong even to put what I will so gladly do for your brother in the way I did. Only it would be more than repayment, if, in time, you could like me better than as a friend. Don’t answer me now . . . I said in time, in time!’

What I said I do not know; but I seemed to withdraw into myself with an unconscious gesture of almost dismay, and of putting away the idea as an impossibility. He added gently, but in haste :

‘Perhaps, indeed, I should not have spoken now; but that I fancied you might already have forgotten a matter that pained you at Broadhams, now that St. Leger has sold himself, and given up his best chances of happiness.’

‘Sold himself? How? What do you mean? To—to Mrs. Jessop? Is it *true*? How do you know it?’ I answered with a face that was moved and lips that slightly quivered despite myself. For I knew in my own heart in the last three months that it would come to pass; but no one had ever as yet told me so.

‘Is it *not* true? What I heard was common report. But, if you have not heard it, I am sorry I spoke—very sorry.’—So saying, Fulke Bracy drew himself up, and half turning away looked back at the house nestled among the trees. This part of our

conversation had now taken such a disagreeable turn, he would fain have walked away from the troubled questions he read coming in my moved face and pleading eyes. But it had gone too far for that. 'You need not be sorry for telling me about him,' I went on, recovering myself. 'If it is not the case yet, it will very likely be so. It cannot and *does not* signify to me now, Mr. St. Leger has passed out of my life.'

'Have you given him up then?' asked Bracy.

'Say rather that he gave me up,' I answered cynically, in the bitterness of my spirit, as if wishing not to spare myself every possible mortification.

'He could not afford more than a flirtation with me—I am penniless, you know! But this much I have to thank him for, that

henceforth I shall never torment myself more by caring for any one. I rather wish I could; for it would make me seem fresh and young again, but I cannot.'

'Hi, hi! gee up, there—gee up! Are you two there? Come and help me to drive this calf back to the paddock. It has been eating all the young shoots on my best, old, fuchsia-bush,' cried Bee's voice in desperation from a little distance, each of her words being separated by audible whacks.

She was near the house, in what was still called by courtesy the garden; a weedy spot among the shrubs backed by rank laurels, half enclosed by ragged yews, all spreading wildly where they should not. In the centre of a plot of long coarse grass was a broken-down fountain, and here a healthy red calf was plunging sportively

amongst some neglected fuchsia bushes, the only surviving evidences of culture.

As we approached to her aid, I said hastily to my companion in an undertone: 'People talk so much gossip, don't they? One can't always quite believe all one hears—can one?'

'Perhaps not. No: I suppose one cannot always,' he replied in a guarded even tone, and said no more, but promptly began obeying Bee's excited requests.

As I stood still, it struck me that in my eagerness to ascertain something more about Clair St. Leger, my last remark had been ill-timed and ungracious.

Feeling this reflection had come too late, and with my mind full of new thoughts, I went sadly enough homewards; for the Barn was now the only home remaining to me worthy that name.

The said old house, or rather what now remained of it, was exquisitely situated a little above the river, down to which sloped little terraces that the sheep closely nibbled. Before the door was a curious hardly human object; seeming to end in a double head, strongly suggestive of a pair of old boots that rather needed re-soling.

‘Bob!’ I exclaimed, recognizing that individual, who was thus solitarily amusing himself by standing on his head. ‘What are you doing?’ The feet slowly swung down; and with a red mild face, and a half-ashamed laugh, my brother resumed his usual stand-point of existence, and looked back at me.

‘I was taking the air, Pleasance; that’s all. It is my favourite way of doing so.’

‘Can you not find anything better to

do?' I asked, almost sharply, inwardly irritated by the contest between the troubled sea of thoughts tossing in my mind and his placid chewing-the-cud state.

'What else have I got to do?' answered poor Bob humbly, yet with something touching in his patient tone.

What indeed! The offer of that money and such a splendid partner on the farm! Not knowing what to think,—whether he would get the offer now, whether he ought even to accept it,—I went still more slowly indoors.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE Baron's Stay, to restore to the old Barn its due honours, stood, as was said, close above the noisy little river.

There was now only a small part of the ancient dower-house left, that had not been dispersed by the element of fire. This was just the two-storied main body of grey stone, containing the hall, a sitting-room or two, and the rooms above this. On one side this portion ended in a pretty gable, with twisted chimney, carved eaves, and hanging jessamine curtains; but its opposite side broke down pitiably but very picturesquely

into ruins, hung with ivy. Two more wings stretched in roofless dilapidation at the back, with eyeless window-sockets ; the whole surrounding an empty grass-grown courtyard. All this part of the house had been burned down.

On the evening of the day last described we were sitting in the dining-room. We had all just partaken of one of my grand-aunt's characteristic dinners. First came caviare, sent by a Russian prince, met in the Caucasus by Miss Beaumanoir. Next followed a fowl, buried in rice and gravy, its toes sticking out limply from the tomb instead of a stone tablet to its virtues ; itself being as tough as a brickbat. This my grand-aunt called pillau,—and Bob and I were in inward doubts whether, like the old traveller she was, she would not have liked

to have partaken of it with her fingers. Afterwards we had each been helped to a suet dumpling, supposed to suit our British taste. Bee and I drank only fair spring water with this ; but Bob had village beer (which our guest insisted on sharing). There was also a bottle of very old Beaumanoir Madeira especially for Fulke Bracy ; with strange liqueurs bearing outlandish names, and each supposed to have been brewed in some mountain monastery, in wild fastnesses and deserts, seldom visited save by such adventurous spirits as our now aged hostess.

It was not a large meal, for our grand-aunt was only used to eat very sparingly herself. Bob, however, crowned the poor foundation with a huge mountain of bread and cheese. If Mr. Bracy felt famished he manfully suppressed all outward signs thereof ; and when

Turkish coffee followed, very thick, black, and strong, in tiny handleless cups, I alone seemed to my secret self still hungry, or at least not satisfied.

Never had I given a thought before to what I ate or drank, or how I fared: even now it seemed to me that bread and water served with bright silver and fine damask would be delightful. But the change from Stoke to the terrible dilapidation, the disorder, discomfort, and even dirt of poor Aunt Bee's home, notwithstanding her kindness, was severe. I was already sick to death of a month of this strange hand-to-mouth life at the Barn, where to-night reigned unwonted cleanliness and order. My soul hankered after the flesh-pots of Egypt; that is to say, for the elegance and quiet, the ease and refinement, of my dear lost home.

The room we were in was wainscoted, like the rest of the house, in dark wood to the ceiling ; only relieved by some carving round the panels. By day, it was dimly lit by one deep window with heavy stone mullions that left the further chamber in general obscurity. Even this night, though we had a roaring fire of logs on the stone hearth, and a paraffin lamp on the carved oak table, little was to be descried of the fine, oak buffet over yonder, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, and bearing the date 1660. This was to be Bob's legacy : it had been promised him since he was a small boy. Upon it stood two very handsome, but, alas ! grimy silver salvers ; last Beaumanoir relics, for the bailiffs had been here in olden days. The rest of the furniture was poor enough indeed, save, for my especial pride and possession, an old inlaid escritoire.

This had been a never-failing source of delight in my childhood's days, being full of the most surprising hidden drawers and nooks all carved with rhymes round their edges ; and having a little temple in its heart with a Cupid, tiny mirrors, pillars, and pendant lamps. 'There—I'll give it a present to you, child, now and for always,' Bee had said in those days. 'It belonged to your great-grandfather, my father, and then to my poor brother, your grandfather, who treasured it so much that when this house was burnt down (he was staying here at the time with me), this was the first thing he flew to save. They say it is worth *hundreds* ! it is such a fine old specimen ; and for that reason I never would let it go, however hardly I was pinched—but, bless you ! I'd far rather splash my ink over a common deal table any day.'

Besides this cherished escritoire, there was a great sofa apparently made of horsehair and gridirons. On this Bob, dinner ended, had flung himself near the fire-blaze and was sweetly sleeping.

My grand-aunt and Mr. Bracy had placed a draughtboard on the table, immediately after the Turkish coffee had been removed. ‘Let me see—the last time you were here, six months ago, you beat me,’ cried the old lady, sitting up straight, with great zest,—‘I must have my revenge.’

‘Yes ; but the time we played before that again, a year ago, you made an example of me, Miss Beaumanoir, as I distinctly remember ; so that we keep even, you see,’ returned Fulke Bracy, with no less eager earnestness ; yet a minute before when my aunt had turned her back, I had caught him stifling a yawn.

It struck me that he must be a good-hearted man, who thus came alone twice a year to cheer the solitary life of a strange old woman. Certainly, as my grand-aunt bluntly declared, he had come earlier this year than ever before ; and she roundly taxed him with finding my society and Bob's an attraction beyond that of her own withered charms. All the same, as he smilingly reminded her, he had never failed to come before.

They had been playing some time, and only the occasional click of the draughtsmen was audible in their engrossed silence, together with Bob's heavy breathing, and the sputtering of the fire-logs. Meanwhile, I held a large old book in my hands—'Cœlebs in Search of a Wife.' Bee's whole library offered nothing more amusing to divert my heavy thoughts, excepting 'Gulliver's Travels' and

the 'Arabian Nights.' But gradually the heavy volume slipped on my knee; and leaning my cheek on my hand, with my eyes fixed on the fire-glow, I was wrapped in a meditation sad enough.'

A slight sound as light as the tapping of an ivy-leaf on the window-pane struck my ear, but hardly roused me till the old lurcher, Bee's favourite dog, lifted his head from where he lay on the warm stone hearth. He pricked his ears, and turned his eyes towards the curtainless window, but that was from force of habit, for he was almost stone-blind. I looked round, too—and gave a little gasp, but felt too startled to speak. From the darkness outside a face, shadowy and bodiless, seemed to look in upon me. If there was a figure also, either it was hidden by the thick ivy, or the light of the room only

showed a face like that of a ghost. Next instant it had vanished into darkness.

It was the face of—Clair St. Leger.

The players went on undisturbed behind an old Chinese screen, between them and the window: Bob slumbered still: the old dog laid down his head again. I only sat upright, my eyes wide distended, my face and hands deadly cold, feeling sure I had seen a vision.

The tall clock ticked slowly on and on, a cricket chirruped several times; still no one looked round or took notice of me. I began to recover myself now; my breath came easier, and furtively with a trembling hand I wiped the cold damp from my brow. Whatever had happened—if this was indeed a vision at the parting of soul and body such as I believed, I was glad none should ever know of it but myself. It was my secret.

After a while, one of the maids entered the room in a shy, frightened manner, and sidled towards me as if looking for something. She was the only young servant in the house, nevertheless she was the only one I disliked; being a carrotty-haired, muddy-complexioned girl, whose eyes never could look one straight in the face. She was old Tozer's daughter.

‘What do you want here, at this hour?’ demanded Bee sharply, taking notice for once of this infringement of good household rules.

‘Oh, please, Miss, I was only searching for the cat. I wanted to shut her up for the night, but she's not anywhere,’—and the girl dived as if to look under the table beside me.

To my astonishment, there came a little tug at my skirt; then another. With my nerves all on tension I started, not knowing what

this could be, feeling absolutely frightened of I knew not what. A red hand stole next from under the table holding a folded leaf of paper, plainly torn from a pocket-book, and laid it on my knee. This was so eerie, that, although without speaking, I drew back and involuntarily looked round, as if about to appeal to the others who were again intent upon their game. But the servant-girl retreating from her plantigrade attitude under the table caught my eye, and gave me a warning look, putting her finger on her lip. Then she left the room slowly, eyeing me before closing the door with a peculiarly beckoning glance.

Of course, I had known it was she who pulled my dress, but was so dazed still with the apparition at the window that I could not understand the girl's conduct. Almost

trembling I unfolded the paper, and saw pencilled in Clair's writing :

*' Come outside, and speak to me if only for a minute. I must see you once more ; don't refuse me, darling !*

‘ CLAIR.’

Two minutes later, I stood outside the dining-room in the cold dark hall, looking round in the shadows fearfully. The only light came from a farthing candle in a tin sconce against the black wainscoting of the passage down near the kitchen. My footsteps echoed on the bare stone floor and up into the high raftered ceiling as I stole along, hardly knowing where to go. Then a figure stepped out from behind one of the black, big, wooden pillars supporting the staircase gallery, and with difficulty I repressed a little

cry as it touched me silently on the shoulder in the almost complete darkness. It was the Tozer girl, who whispered with an impertinent familiarity: 'He's waiting for you among the bushes there. I've left the front door open for you to slip out.'

Turning from her close breath on my ear, with a vague sense of being lowered and contaminated by such an ally, I mechanically took a shawl she handed me, and drew it closely round my head and shoulders; feeling more as if it hid me from myself than as a protection against the weather. So mazed—as if without any will of my own, but walking in a dream—I, Pleasance Brown, found myself outside in the cool damp night air of the Spring time.

I had not made three uncertain steps from the porch when a presence stepped beside me

from behind a dark buttress, caught me tightly in its arms, and drawing back my shawl covered my face with kisses. For a moment or two I was so taken unawares, and still overcome with my late fear and faintness—besides the extraordinary surprise of Clair St. Leger being here at the Barn, at night, too—that I did not, or perhaps could not, resist him. Then, with a returning flash of pride and memory, in self-anger against my momentary weakness, I endeavoured to push him away, with very decided strength of purpose in my action.

In vain ! Clair only tightened his hold the more, and kissed me again on the cheek and lips, with a force in which there seemed no respect, but only passion left.

It was against my will now he did it. He knew it ; I felt he knew it, and a sudden

almost hatred of anger took possession of my soul, even when in his arms.

The dining-room window was so near, the rays from the lamp inside falling on our very path, that I dared not utter an exclamation, for my own sake. Then, with a violent silent effort, I stood beside him free.

There had been, no doubt, in mind no less than expressed action a struggle of will between us; till he must have felt mine would submit no longer. Some sound of whispered reproach or entreaty must have escaped him, for inside the room the old dog gave a low suspicious growl. We stood turned to statues by the window.

A cold thrill ran through me, and quick thoughts came of shame at the situation—of bewildering doubt.

But Clair caught my hand, before I could

think more, whispering, ‘Hang the dog; he’ll discover all if we stay here. . . Come away a little, where I can speak to you without the walls having ears. I *must* speak to you to-night, Pleasance: you will come, if ever you loved me. You do love me, still; don’t you? You do! . . .’

It was in my heart to say no and mean it too! he had so killed what feelings of attachment still survived in me, by outraging my self-respect. Yet my woman’s pride, instead of being lessened thereby, only grew and grew with each moment. But, not knowing in truth what I now felt for him, I did go mechanically to hear what he might say. It seemed to me, now, that he had come to renew our lapsed engagement; and, so strange is the human heart, I was sorry for it!—and yet felt bound to listen if he desired it.

First love seemed to me sacred—and not with honour to be put aside first by *me*.

So going side by side, though I would not let him touch my hand again, we stole, two silent shadows, across the rough garden-plot, carefully beyond the radius of light, till we stood under the old garden-wall. Here our voices could not be heard in the parlour. Wet grass was under our feet; dripping bushes, just opening in leaf under Spring's sweet charm, surrounded us. A little chill shower came down from a passing cloud, obscuring most of the few faint stars in the night-sky. We stood shivering under the partial shelter of a big cherry-laurel, and did not speak for a minute.

Then Clair began first, 'Pleasance, come to me!' opening his arms. I stamped my foot on the wet turf in hot indignation and im-

patience. Was *this* what he chose to say first, without apology or one word of penitence after his desertion of me and cruel silence; after the terrible desolation of death and the change in my life?—no thought of anything but his own present gratification.

‘No, I will not go to you. Don’t dare to touch me again without my leave. Tell me, instead, why do *you* come to me?’

‘You are not displeased with me; not surely, Pleasance — and because I kissed you?’ in the old soft, pliant tones that had so wound themselves round my heart.

‘Displeased?—insulted! angered! would be better terms than that of mere displeasure,’ in bitter echo.

‘You used to think differently. You used to kiss me back again,’ he answered low, with a poor attempt at imitating my scorn,

so utterly ignoring all the right and wrong of *then* and *now*, that only a fool or a man in his selfishness but would have understood me better. It came as a taunt to my sore heart ; to me who had so waited and waited, for the smallest such sign of affection in the bygone days ; and now . . .

So I answered : ‘ Then it was different because I loved you, and *that* made it right ; but ever since I have been learning to unlove you. What you did just now was, to treat me not as a lady, as the woman you love, but as—as you might a bar-maid ! ’

He laughed, a soft uneasy laugh ; but not one deeply moved. Or no ; was it not rather with just so much emotion as his nature was capable of feeling ? The thought struck me with a keen pang, as if I first knew him as he really was.

‘I suppose I ought to apologize for forgetting that I was only human, and that you were—Pleasance Brown.’

‘But once again, tell me what brings you here to-night? Clair, think of it; I cannot stay out here long—what would they say of us? and you have told me nothing yet! Why, oh, why! did you not write, or come to see me openly?’

He groaned.

‘Why? Because I am no longer my own master; because I am in debt and desperation; because I have no right to come in the light of day to see you like an honest man. Oh, my poor pretty Pleasance, forgive me—how pretty you looked to-night when I peeped in at the window!’ (He had begun stroking my arm now; the man could not exist, it seemed, without caressing or being

caressed.) 'I believe you never knew how pretty you really are, did you?'

'What can that matter to you now!' I cried out, driven to a far higher pitch of desperation than himself. 'I am penniless, remember, and homeless nearly. They tell me you have consoled yourself with Mrs. Jessop and her fortune: *is that true?*'

No answer. Clair had stepped back, leaning against the garden-wall in the darkness. I could not see his face, but some sixth sense seemed to tell me he was at last greatly moved.

'*Is it true?*' I pursued, still more excited. 'You have come all the way out here to tell me something. Is that it? is that true?' In my own heart, at the moment, I did not believe it true. All along there was no time for thought; except a sudden quick flash that

if it were so indeed, he *could* not have come to tell me it. So that, even while pressing my questions, I inwardly rejoiced.

‘It is true!’ said the unhappy wretch, covering his eyes with one hand.

‘Good God!’ I murmured. ‘Then how could you’—in growing passion—‘how *dared* you come here to-night?’

‘Because I wanted to see you once more; to have you to myself if only for a minute, for the last time. So I came down to the hotel over at D— (the nearest town) and drove out to-night in a fly, as I must show myself in town early to-morrow. And no matter what you think of me, I am glad I have done it; I am more satisfied now.’

‘Are you?’ came icily from my lips. ‘Some murderers I have heard feel quite satisfied, too, when they have done their deed.

Let me congratulate you on feeling pleased that you enticed me out here to be insulted !’

‘Pleasance,’ he pleaded, ‘don’t say that ; you are so cold, so passionless, almost hard. Any other girl who had been out in the world as you have, would forgive me, and understand that a few lucky men may marry for love ; but that for a miserable pauper like me, there is nothing but . . .’

Then, I suppose Clair must have really cared for me ; for to my horror he broke down and sobbed out all his story. The miserable tale of how last summer he had honestly meant to work for my sake, but had put it off awhile, and yet awhile ; then came debts and difficulties, increasing like a gathering snowball. He had hardly dared look me in the face. Mrs. Jessop had been there too—he saw she meant to have him. No use

telling me ; of course I could guess, being a woman, how it had all come about. He had seemed each day caught closer in a net. Perhaps, after all, it was the best thing he could do for himself, *under the circumstances*. ‘And when—and when—?’ I asked, dry-throated. I was not quite able to speak as I wished ; but wanted to know *when* he had proposed to Mrs. Jessop, out of a burning curiosity all women understand, even though the small details they crave to know, each sting and madden them like so many prickles of poisoned thorns. He answered heavily :

‘The day after to-morrow ! . . . We are to be married quite quietly. It is her wish ; as her husband is not very long dead, and people are sure to talk.’

‘The day . . . after . . . to-morrow . . . ! —*married* ! Well, “happy’s the wooing that’s

not long a-doing," Mr. St. Leger. And may I ask when and where did you both become engaged?'

'What does it matter now, as you said yourself,' he answered roughly, almost rudely. 'It was at Broadhams, I believe; after you left, anyhow; that I can tell you, for certain, if you care to know.'

Yes: that was well to know, certainly. For the Broadhams party had been broken up suddenly, *the day after I left*, by the news of my poor father's death.

There followed perfect silence between us. Only the cherry-laurel leaves hustled softly in the wind; an occasional rain-drop pattered down. Clair, it seemed, in the semi-darkness, was half-ashamedly trying to recover himself from the emotion into which he had been betrayed. I stood by, feeling about as still

in body as Lot's wife, hoarse-throated, dry-eyed, too, with burning eyeballs.

There seemed a double woman in me. One looking on the man near with an awakened sense that her love for him was dead, and had been so for weeks past of slow-growing contempt, without her knowledge—yet still capable of feeling for his unhappy state that tenderest pity akin to divinest feeling. The other was a woman whose pride was roused; whose heart was hot within her with anger and indignation, that only did not leap forth in words to shrivel up his pleas and pitiful self-excuses—but for scorn.

She would never feel the same fresh girl again; and he had wilfully caused this.

There came through the silence the well-known sound of the old door, that had

dropped on its hinges, grating on the stone floor as it was flung energetically open. Out rushed a little posse of dogs, Bob's terriers, yelping with joy to greet the night and freedom; while Bob's voice called lustily:

‘Well—I’m off to the stable to see this puppy in distemper. You won’t come, Bracy?’

‘No, thank you. I think I’ll stay here and smoke quietly till you come back,’ was answered in unusually subdued tones.

Just then a cat must have darted through the bushes somewhere, for away went half the canine pack in hot pursuit, giving tongue after their kind. Bob, with gleeful shouts of ‘Hi! Hi!’ at once joined in the chase. Two laggards, however, blind Jowler, the lurcher, and little Vixen, who was too fat to

run, but all the more inquisitive, not seeing which way the hunt swept, had put their noses to the ground, and so came straight towards us. Next moment, the backs of both had bristled; and their growls, as they hastily retreated with short sharp barks of defiance and alarm, betrayed at once that here verily was more than a pussy.

‘Go! go!’ I whispered in agony to St. Leger, in vain trying my blandishments on our over-zealous guardians. ‘If you have any caring left for me, go; that old door in the wall—push! it is nearly rotten—then you are in the lane.’

‘Brutes!’ he muttered, looking hastily round for the means of escape. ‘I could choke that old dog with pleasure. Just say good-bye, Pleasance, once more, and then . . .’

There!—As ever he had had no thought for me, only for himself; and now it was too late.

Fulke Bracy's figure stood between him and the door, challenging us in the darkness.

‘Hullo! Stop, you sir—stop. What are you doing here at this hour?’—then looking with recognition in our mute faces in accents of the extremest surprise. ‘What! St. Leger and . . . Miss Brown!! I *beg* your pardon. Forgive me for intruding, it was quite unintentionally, I assure you.’ And with a tone and manner I should never forget if I lived to be a dead-withered old woman—in which sounded a hundred smaller tones, pained surprise, nobility, regret, hurt self-pride that strove not to think of self, all blended by true manliest reverence for womanhood in whatever situation, such as he could alone

have learned from humbly following the example of

‘The first true gentleman that ever lived,’

he turned on his heel.

‘Stay, Mr. Bracy,’ I cried in hot impulse, hardly knowing what I said. ‘I want to go back to the house with you. You are too old a friend to be ever an intruder . . . Mr. St. Leger, I do not want to be unkind, but you must go now: and you ought to have gone sooner, as I asked you. Good-bye—I will wish you as much happiness in your future life as—as is possible.’

My voice dropped, I was so sorry for him, so ashamed; and yet stood upright, conscious of my own rectitude as a woman, and would not stoop to seem otherwise.

‘I am going, Miss Brown. Good night,’

said Clair bitterly, vouchsafing no word of recognition to his former friend, whose lofty tone he strove—with what a weak imitation—to echo. ‘Had I known that Mr. Bracy was staying here, I should of course have understood that you would not care for my presence.’ And therewith raising his hat cavalierly, he turned away.

The rotten old door was violently shaken ; there was the sound of a receding foot-fall down the stony lane. He was gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Then turning impressively to Fulke Bracy, who stood with eyes downcast on the ground, waiting my pleasure, as it were. ‘Whatever you may have thought, seeing us together, believe me, what I told you this evening was true. I will have nothing more in this world to say to Clair St. Leger ! I never knew he was coming

here to-night. You are a true man, I think. There are very few left I care for in this world, or who care for me, but you have always been kind. May I tell you all about it?—only first say you believe me.’

‘I believe you utterly incapable of doing anything that was not from right and good motives, without the necessity of your saying a word more: so why distress yourself by doing so?’ answered Fulke softly but sadly.

‘But you could not understand otherwise. I must tell you . . . indeed I must, as you saw him here to-night,’ was my trembling answer; then in hurried accents explained all, ending, ‘*and he is to be married the day after to-morrow!*’

My old friend remained very very silent. At last he said, low, only this: ‘What can I say? You yourself would not wish me to

blame or judge this other man, whatever I may think.' (He was right there.) 'Only this I may say, you have been severely tried. God bless you, poor child ; and thank you for telling me.'

Up came Bob cheerily. 'Well, we had a rare chivy. It was a strange cat, and deserved being chased. The dogs know better than to hunt our own. Why, Pleasance, what are you doing out here ?'

'Looking at the stars with me. Let us hope there is a very bright one for herself, somewhere in the far distance,' said Bracy in his ever manly voice.

My secret was safe with him.

## CHAPTER V.

YES ! My secret was safe enough. But, still, all that night I sat up by my window till the solitary candle burned out—none other was to be had. There in the bare, black-raftered room, where comforts were little provided, I sat and shivered to myself, though not from cold, being wrapped in a shawl. But it was a terribly wild night, dark as could be, stormy, whilst the rain lashed the panes. How wet he would have been but for that fly he brought, I thought ! It was so like him doing that. In such a case Bracy would have walked, rather than expose

a girl to possible village gossip by his visit being known. But then *he* was different.

Pity some other brighter, happier girl than myself could not be loved by and love him. I could not, in the least; much as I liked him.

So I sat on alone, a white, miserable, lonely figure, till through the rain and wind and blackness came the chill stealing dawn. The last page of my love for Clair St. Leger had just been written in my heart or brain, or wherever we keep such memories, and while still freshly wet, as it were, I wanted to brood over it. The heart put him out for ever; the mind tried him and judged him again and again all through that night, admitting every plea, extenuating, almost forgiving, yet—yet worst of all *despising* this first, this now old love!

But both were sick and troubled, whilst my head burned with fever, and sleep seemed only a possibility of dreadful dreams.

I knew myself ill; yet Fulke Bracy was going away to-morrow, and if he spoke to me again I must know what was in my own mind. Almost till morning dawned, there was a battle in my soul. For, verily, it was a temptation. I hated poverty, the petty, grinding, daily miseries of reckoning how many half-pence in our altered circumstances I dared feel justified in spending, and the loss of so much that is pleasant and lovely in life; hated the thought of living on dear old Bee's scanty hoard—and yet what could I work at? What can such girls as I work at, that is not almost worse than struggling on at home.

Other people often marry without love, and get on very fairly well. Why not I?

Nobody *could* like Fulke Bracy better, no one utterly respect him more; and then good-bye carking care for me and Rose and Bob; for our mother too, no doubt, if she would accept his aid. (This last was thought in the darkness of the later small hours, after Clair St. Leger's ghost had been buried).

It drew towards dawn . . .

'This man is so good and single-hearted, it would be a shame and a sin not to give him as much as he gives in such a bargain,' was the thought that grew with the growing light. . .

The cocks crew outside; the world awakened; there came a rush of returning vigour and life to all things with the rising of the sun, even to my sleepless, weary, troubled self. And then I knew my own mind.

‘But are you sure of this?’ asked Fulke later. We were standing together in the porch; the warm sun reviving and invigorating grass and flowers and bushes, and all that had been laid low and wet with last night’s storm.

How different a scene it was, such a soft, fair morning! How different a man this one who had just now again offered me all he had honestly earned, and himself who was worth far more; not pressing or urging, but only kindly asking me to consider whether, in the time to come, he might not be allowed to care for me and for all my family.

No fine words. No ill-timed expressions of his own inner feelings, which after last night’s scene might have jarred upon me. After having urged his pleas in vain, he now ended in a tone of manly regret.

‘I don’t like to say much, now ; but it was impossible to go away and say nothing. Pleasance, my poor child, you are not fitted for a rough life ; I know no one less so. Even your little sister, Rose, would be far better able to endure privations.’

‘Mr. Fulke!—my kind friend of old—do you know that you were tempting me to do what my conscience declares would be a great wrong to you, for the sake of—money?’

‘No, no, no. For the sake of the care, comfort, love, the happy life I would have hoped to give you,’ he returned, rather huskily.

Till then, we had both been speaking so calmly, dispassionately, any onlooker at even a short distance would never have guessed the subject of our discourse.

‘Say; if I were to come back in six months, or a year; or even two years?’ as I dolefully and slowly shook my head. ‘No? Could you not like me any better?’

‘I have always liked you *so much*, that I don’t believe it possible to like you any better,’ was my truthful answer.

‘Oh, why is it, I wonder, that one may respect and like a person above all others and yet, and yet—’

‘I know what you would say—yet cannot give them any warmer feelings. There is fate in it, I suppose. Well, good-bye, I will trouble you no more. Here is Miss Beaumanoir, too.’

‘How well you are looking, Pleasance, child. Quite a poppy painted on each cheek,’ said my grand-aunt.

‘I think Miss Brown is looking far from

well. Pray take care of her, or she will be ill,' said Bracy, almost roughly.

Then my grand-aunt's old gig came to the door; with Bob's yellow colt, Dandelion, his only equine possession, harnessed thereinto.

'Hope you've made your will, sir?' grumbled old Tozer to the departing guest, as he kept Dandelion from making plunges at the sky. Tozer was a very burly, bearded old fellow with the slyest of eyes, and a growl so rude it was given credit for honesty.

'Oh, I'm giving him every chance of life by driving him myself, and we'll help to bury him decently if he does get his neck broken,' cried Bob cheerily, scrambling up to his dangerous perch. 'Now, Bracy, come along. . . . Look out, man, for goodness sake! One would think you didn't care if you were smashed up.'

For Bracy had got in as coolly and even absently, as if the golden steed was not endeavouring to spill both the gig's occupants before bolting wildly down the drive.

When my brother returned, he found me alone, lying on the hard old sofa in a dark corner of the dismal parlour; trying to rest my sadly aching head on the horse-hair bolster.

‘What a terrible fool you have been, Pleasance!’ So said Master Bob, striding up, and looking down upon me with a deep frown upon his ruddy young face.

That was all he could find to say to me, he, my best beloved of those now left on earth; and yet he saw me so disconsolate and wretched.

‘Oh, don’t, Bob! I know—I know! but it would have been wrong to do anything else,’

was my utterly illogical and miserable answer ; then weakly added, ‘ How did you guess ? ’

‘ Guess ! Am I gone stark-staring mad too ! ’ replied he, Irish fashion, question for question. ‘ As if he was likely to offer to go shares in the farm with me for nothing. He told me of it last night. Rather not— ! ’

‘ But you won’t accept it, Bob ? You could not now,’ cried I, raising myself on my elbow.

‘ Shan’t I, though. He spoke again to me this morning about it. Do you imagine because you have thrown away your chances in life, that I am to do the same ? . . . Not if I know it,’ slowly enunciated the youth ; with a determination and purpose of manner that the humble March Hare, standing yesterday with his head on mother earth and his heels to the sky, had certainly been devoid of owning.

He added in a wildly explanatory manner, making for the door :

‘I did haggle about accepting him, on your account ; hoping devoutly, with my heart in my mouth, that Bracy would not go and take me at my word. But he’s a grand fellow. He said we two had been such friends in the old days at Dartmoor, that I was to consider it a settled matter, for the sake of auld lang syne.’

‘Auld lang syne ! Auld lang syne !’ the words haunted me and rang in my ears all that day.

The next night I was so ill, that for many a night and day afterwards I knew no one. The burthen of sickness had been brought by me upon my poor grand-aunt’s little household, strained enough in its resources already ; by me who was so grieved before to

give her the burthen of supporting us. The grief that *I* should have done this tormented me in my intervals of returning consciousness ; and, maybe, the feverish longing to recover quickly delayed recovery.

## CHAPTER VI.

DARTMOOR! Dartmoor! . . .

One year and four months have gone by like an ill dream, since that strange visit of St. Leger to the Barn, and my miserable illness. I felt grown calmer; more restful in spirit; and now thankful for small mercies and daily petty joys perhaps before overlooked. I, Pleasance Brown, had grown thinner, and lost some of the former good looks, those who loved me had seen in me.

I was shabbily dressed, in an old, old gown of the Stoke days—had no prospect of another; no vague hopes either now of

indefinite work to be paid for substantially ; no airy castles ; no golden dreams. Half-pence and I had become intimately acquainted ; and how far they would go, or how far one could go without them, was a matter in which few persons of far greater experience could surpass me.

And yet all this did not torment me now. An older, poorer, plainer girl, in a worn dress and coarse straw hat, I was lying full length among the bracken on a Dartmoor hill-side ; only troubling myself how to lay my head more comfortably now and again on my outstretched arm ; only thinking what a sweet smell rose up from the warm earth that summer afternoon ; idly and utterly drinking into my soul the beauty of—

‘ The sun, and the large air, and the sweet earth,  
And the hours that hum like fireflies on the hill

As they burn out and die, and the broad heaven,  
And the small clouds that swim and swoon i' the sun,  
And the small flowers.'

Away downwards, at some little distance, if one just raised a sleepy head on one elbow and blinked in the sunlight, could be seen the brown thatched roofs of Wheatfield Farm, and its comfortable barns, linnhay, and such-like outhouses. Without any effort, some of its embosoming, thereto pertaining, oak-trees, that grew up the hill-side, were visible cutting the blue sky; or a circling flock of its pigeons would mount a little way above the friendly eaves and gables.

But it was too much trouble, generally, to keep one's eyelids open this delicious lazy afternoon; so mine blinked and closed softly, letting only a soft rosy light through on the sight, till I was aware of a rustle overhead

among the fern-stalks, and saw the hem of a familiar, dark-red, cotton gown near my face.

‘Is that you?’ said I lazily, as if it *could* be any one else, looking up at Mrs. Gladman; adding, with a well-pleased tone of thorough enjoyment, ‘Are you come to talk to me? I am very glad of it.’

Down sank that most excellent of women, as gently as a feather-bed, beside me. How marvellously comely, and little changed she still was; one of those persons who grow old imperceptibly and almost delightfully.

‘Yes, Pleasance, dear. Now, what have you got pleasant to tell me?’

‘Well, that the air on Dartmoor is fresher and sweeter than anywhere else in the world; and in summer Wheatfield Farm is the most delightful spot on earth—except one—dear old Stoke!’

‘Come! that is very nice,’ said the dear voice overhead in gratified tones. ‘But why only in summer, Pleasance, my child? I have lived thirty years now at The Farm, and can honestly declare to never having felt myself isolated or dull in the winters; and so would you feel too, I believe, in the same position.’

The even musical voice which since childhood had always seemed to me to breathe the truest spirit of *motherliness* I could imagine, laid no stress on the words; yet, though only back at Wheatfield since two days, I knew the hidden meaning. In the same position? As wife and mistress down at the old brown house!

‘How nice it is to feel so sleepy; and have nothing at all to do,’ I murmured, closing my eyes again with secret baseness of evasion. For, mercifully, Mrs. Gladman

was too dear and kind to think me rude, or to suspect guile.

‘Then sleep, my child. You came here only to enjoy yourself; remember, when you wake up, you shall tell me all you have been doing this past year and a half. Meanwhile, I like to sit still, too, and think.’

So there was silence between us for a time. The sun smote still warmly down on the hill-side, but the giant bracken fronds closed softly all round us two. The sweet breeze on this little upper world tempered the heat and was fragrant with gorse and heather scents, wafted from hill beyond hill, upheaving their shoulders behind each other to the horizon; each crowned with some strange-shaped out-cropping rocks—the *tors* of Devon; and forming a natural rampart to the grand, unbroken, violet sweeps of moor-

land that lay in solitude in the heart of the hills.

But even as I thus lay dreamily, my dear old friend's last words set me a musing, and by-and-by there grew therefrom a sadness almost akin to unreasonable bitterness in my mind. Little she knew thereof, sitting placid and serene above me, who lay seemingly as untroubled as any mountain nymph.

*Tell her something about the past year and a half of my life!*

Could she guess nothing of what the past months had been in bitterness to me and my mother; or how unlike her own easy, tranquil farm-life? Truly, my occasional letters had told little of our struggles with deprivation, penury, almost want. My mother was so proud she would never have

forgiven me for so revealing our position, even to my god-mother, the old friend of the Brown family, she had so sweetly patronized. But, lying there, I felt inwardly surprised that Mrs. Gladman did not seem to understand it *without* the telling. That would be a true ideal friendship, which should *know* by a communicated flash of thought; and sympathize without agonizing us afresh to describe one by one all the bleeding wounds or daily pin-pricks, the soreness caused by friends who disappointed our reasonable expectations, or the terrible nothingness of our lives since some one of our best-beloved has gone before us into the world of light.

Yes; it had been truly a bad year and a half, which my mother and I had spent together, in that mean little house on

Camden Hill. But this much had come of it, that we had grown, if not into the perfect and rare unison I had enjoyed with my father—ah! that relationship could never come on earth for me again!—yet to understand each other. My mother was altogether devoted to Beau, now; lived, even pinched for him,—and what a change for her was there!—She *toiled* for him, sewing at nights to gain a scanty pay at genteel ladies' embroidery, till her lovely eyes were dimmed and weary; not that she ever would own it. And I, though by no means sharing her feeling of devotion,—for how seldom does the idol of one human being seem worthy of such worship to another!—yet admired her beautiful daily self-sacrifice which, at times, rose to unconscious heroism.

It was also an example to see how, though

greatly broken in spirit, from terrible grief and change of fortune, she never once uttered a complaint. How too, for Beau's sake, she tried to have a smile always ready for the wandering artist when he returned to the poor home he scorned. And withal how the former mistress of Stoke kept all her old elegance of manner, trying always undauntedly to disguise poverty under refinement.

After my illness at the Barn, now a year and a half ago, I had gone to London and stayed with my mother. She had written that she could now manage her purse, so as to have me; and would be *glad* that I should come. It would make our little home more cheerful for Beau. Good Mrs. Gladman had asked me at the same time down to Wheatfield Farm for change of air. My

mother never knew I received and refused that kind offer.

Truly, once with mother, she seemed as self-reliant as ever in her gentle, proud way, asking no sympathy from me, only obedience ; still ordering all our affairs without taking me into her counsel or almost confidence. To Beau alone she unbent, was as wax to his wayward wishes ; steel to endure without a frown or murmur what they cost her. Thinking of Dartmoor and my unknown sacrifice so apparently useless, I had been secretly inclined to be morbid, and pity myself that weary London summer ; but as the days grew hotter and dustier, I came to perceive my presence silently comforting to my poor mother. ‘By the world forgot,’ did not quite mean with her forgetting *it*. She had expected more from

former town friends. Not for herself—no ! but some small kindnesses to me, her child ; much warm patronage of Beau ; orders, invitations even to her darling who had been so sought after in society hitherto ; and —so little came. She never repined, but wrapped our mourning as a cloak over our poverty, and bore it in silence ; but *then* I felt she was grateful to have me.

So the summer passed, and a cold pinching winter came. Poverty must be less a trouble in hot countries, where one eats less and requires less of clothing.

Then came another spring, and another hearty letter from Wheatfield, inviting us both. It was the time when swallows come ; —the time when all living creatures seem to want change, and a life of joy ; oh ! how I longed for the peace and plenty of the Farm,

its deep woods, and the exquisitely cold brooks that came babbling and leaping down from the moors. But money was not; even for that simple visit. My mother said in her gentle way, covering inflexible resolve, that it could not be done. Beau had been extravagant in winter, what with fitting up his studio and giving little entertainments to his gay artist-friends. He had gone with some of these at Whitsuntide on a sketching-tour in Normandy; it was a necessity for him to have more than one trip a year, he declared; therefore we two must pinch yet more to make up for it. And so we did through the sweltering heat of June and July; bearing the close days, the stuffy, small rooms; and by my mother's express wish, never betraying to Mrs. Gladman the real cause of our excuses and refusal.

And to tell the truth, I did feel hard then against poor Beau; even dared to speak out my mind, for once. But my mother silently looked at me, and turned away with her head drooped. She knew it; she felt it, too, yet would not complain. That melted my heart, and so I overcame in that one moment my old spirit of bitterness, being lifted up by her example.

At this moment in my meditations, some movement betrayed my wakefulness, and Mrs. Gladman's clear voice said, as if pursuing her own placid vein of thought:

‘Well, dear; after all my efforts to get you down here I *am* glad to have you at the Farm once more.’ Her large soft hand covered mine that had sought it caressingly, and she continued: ‘Yes, it is strange how we plan things, and they all turn out quite

differently. Now I wished to have you here with us last year, and after all it was dear little Rose who came.'

'And made an excellent *locum tenens* in your heart,' I smiled. For indeed Rose had, without perhaps her own knowledge or that of my good god-mother, done more than keep my place warm for me; but had nestled herself into the innermost corner of Mrs. Gladman's affections. She had spent much of her time here last year, alternating her visits between Wheatfield Farm and wherever Sir Dudley and Alice might be, whether in London or at Broadhams; and when two days ago the coach set me down at Chagford, it was Rose who met me smiling and crying,

'At last!—how thin you look, and pale! Why, we thought you were never coming.

I have been here three weeks, and it has been so nice.'

'You are not to imagine that even Rose (much as I love the dear child!) could possibly make me less fond of you, Pleasance,' put in Mrs. Gladman with flurried eagerness. 'No, no; of course my god-daughter can never be quite replaced by any one. Only, you see, dear, neither John nor I were quite satisfied to have her at first instead of you: but really the way she used to be up at six in the morning to see the butter made Devonshire fashion!—and she knows now how to manage a large dairy as well as myself. Then how well she made the jam last year, and insisted on learning even to cure the bacon.' Mrs. Gladman heaved gently with inward laughter at the recollection, remembering herself to add pointedly, how-

ever: 'But, still, don't think for a moment, dear, I could ever be really fonder of her than of you. You must not be jealous.'

'Certainly not.' Yet it struck me that when people are so eager to disclaim a supposition that nobody made, there must be, as people say, 'something in it.'

'Rose has been amusing us so much with stories of the time she spent with Alice—indeed, I ought to get used to saying Lady Digges—in London, this season,' went on Mrs. Gladman, smiling to herself; evidently piqued thereto by the thought of little Rose and her ways and sayings. 'She told me she often felt like a brown sparrow among fine canaries; and longed by way of change to fly down into the street and look for her own crumbs. And she said, too, the only part of her London season she really enjoyed,

was when she had been able to slip off to Camden Hill and see you.'

'*Dear* Rose! yes; she came as often as she could. Even once or twice she gave up some fine parties to see us, so that mother was quite vexed with her on finding it out.'

'But, Pleasance, it seems to me very hard that you should have had none of these amusements; you are young, too.'

'No, no; it was quite fair,' I broke in. 'You know Alice had a perfect right to choose between us; and it was quite as much as we could expect for her to take out one. Oh, she did ask me to some of her large At Homes, but I did not care to go in Cinderella's old clothes — Sir Dudley insisted, you know, on providing dresses for Rose; and so . . . Yes, it is best to keep to one's own line of life,

and not let oneself be tempted to hanker after impossibilities.'

Mrs. Gladman's hand covered mine.

'My poor dear! You have had longings lately then, and I had stupidly fancied that a quiet life of culture and perhaps dulness would quite content you. So natural—at your age.'

'No; oh no. Don't mistake me,' I nervously laughed, trying thereby to keep down a sudden most incomprehensible weakness. 'Only hankering after the old life at Stoke, and my father and Bob—and Rose,' on which the laughter broke utterly down into a fit of sobbing. Mrs. Gladman caressed my head and drew it on her lap, but said never a word; that was her manner; but she made it so comforting by the very way she held one's hand.'

‘It seemed so lonely, sometimes,’ I explained apologizingly, as my best of friends continued her soothing ministrations. ‘But, you see, my mother did not *wish* Rose to come much to us. She said, and so did Alice, that it was everything for Rose not to miss any chance of being well settled in life. Rose has always been my mother’s darling, you know, and so . . .’

‘I know.’ To my surprise Mrs. Gladman’s voice sounded decidedly disturbed. ‘Yes, it must have been lonely. Well! now you are here, dear, I do hope my pleasant child will have a pleasant time. And to tell you a shrewd guess of mine, Pleasance, my pet, ever since last summer when she was so much with us, it has struck me that Rose is on the high-road to a good match.

‘What do you mean? Do tell me!’—  
sitting bolt upright.

‘Has Rose never mentioned meeting any  
old friend?’ was the playful question.

‘Only—let me see . . . No old friend  
excepting Mr. Bracy. No—none.’

‘Well! Don’t you like him?’ meaningly.

Down I sank suddenly again; and began  
plucking up little bits of grass. ‘Ye—es.  
I always liked him very much indeed; but  
you don’t mean that . . .’

‘Why, yes; I do,’ nodded Mrs. Gladman  
cheerfully. ‘Fulke Bracy sought her out a  
great deal for *him*; and when one day I  
praised her to him (judiciously, my dear, for  
I would not meddle for worlds, though most  
anxious to help if one could), he did tell me  
he felt an especial interest in Rose and that . . .  
Well, in fact, he said even more; but as he

is rather reticent he would not wish me to betray his secrets,' with a pleasant laugh; for what elderly woman does not like being taken somewhat into a young man's confidences? And though middle-aged to me, Fulke Bracy was a boy to her.

Then, as I sat silent, she went on. 'Well, dear! You seem meditating so earnestly over my little bit of news; but I know you are glad of it in heart, by the sweet expression in your eyes, though your mouth looks so grave. Ah! Pleasance, you see how well I know your thoughts' (as a smile despite myself broke out on my features). 'You do think it would be a happy match.'

'Very!' with emphasis.

'Then my mind is relieved,' said the dear woman. 'Not to force confidences, or betray any, Pleasance, I did know when Fulke went

to see you at the Barn, two years ago, what he wanted. He only told me enough to make me understand he was not trying to supplant my son John in any underhand way; after the poor fellow had enlisted his services in vain at Broadhams—you cold-hearted child!’

‘Oh, John did not much mind,’ I laughed awkwardly, yet feeling less confused with John’s mother than I might with any other under such circumstances. ‘He liked the pheasant-shooting there so immensely, and the cook! Oh, you bad woman, you simply talked and persuaded him into believing he liked me. You know you did. He never was in love with me one bit.’

‘My dear, indeed, John is one of those men who would never seem violently in love with any girl; never. But he has such a

fund of calm domestic affection, and steady strong liking. Believe me, after marriage with him *the rest would follow*. Oh, I wish you would take a fancy to John!’ urged poor Mrs. Gladman, quite embarrassed by my home-thrust, and looking at me rather plaintively. On which we both with one accord went off into a hearty fit of laughter. Dear me, what good that laugh did me! What a pleasure it is to be with people who are light-hearted as well as wise and experienced, and who don’t go about the world carrying their coffins on their backs.

I felt quite cheered again; so seemed she. We rose to go down-hill to the Farm; for at this evening hour she liked to be in the farmyard and see all her animals well fed and cared for before night. Then, as we scattered a nibbling flock of sheep who had

apparently made up their minds we meant to sit still all the evening there, and now ran helter-skelter before us, she said :

‘ We will say no more about this, my dear Pleasance ; for you only came here to be made happy. Whatever your heart tells you to decide on will always be right in my eyes, and yourself no less dear to me. Oh ! I would not tempt or persuade any girl in such a matter for worlds—though of course I *do* know my own son so well, *that* is a different matter.’ This was a saving clause to her conscience, to which, secretly amused (for I was growing wiser now in understanding characters), I nodded acquiescence. Good soul ! She talked so honestly and seriously of not interfering in affairs of the heart ; had she only lived more in society, what a matchmaker she would have been !

Even now she returned to the subject of Fulke Bracy and Rose. 'You know when he bought the Artist's Cottage last summer, that his poor mother used to live in, and fitted it up so exquisitely, I thought there was more in it than met the eye. John noticed it too (John is very sharp, my dear!). He said two of the rooms were evidently meant for a lady, they are so beautifully fitted up, but not lived in.'

'Rose ought to be very happy,' said I absently.

As we left the hill with its sweet breezes, the short upland grass and grazing sheep, I lingered to take a last look before descending into Featherbed Lane. This was simply a winter water-course whose bed alternated in its steep descent between rocks and rolling gravel, while the Devonshire hedges were so

high on either side that nowhere could a view be had, except when one stopped thankfully at a gate to lean thereon and take breath. Said Mrs. Gladman, as I gazed round, taking a last bird's-eye sweep of gorge and glen, of hill and violet moor outspread, to the rising of the horizon :

‘Talking of marriages, I always meant to ask you about that ill-starred match of Mr. St. Leger’s. Is it true his wife deceived him, and that she had no money?—served him right, after all, for marrying a woman who might have been his mother.’

‘No, no,’ I interrupted, anxious to speak in all fairness. ‘But she was always fond of gambling ; and so, as the most exciting way of indulging the passion, she had invested her all in a dozen wild schemes. Last summer, when there was that great panic in the City,

you know (I don't understand it, but ever so many people were ruined, and everything was wrong in stocks and shares, I believe), well, she was ruined, too! They were just back from their honeymoon, and had not even been at Stoke.'

'And never have since, of course. What a pity that Fulke Bracy had just spent so much money on this Artist's Cottage; and—and—on other things!'

'On Bob's farm at the Barn,' thought I rather sadly to myself, knowing well enough. why she hesitated. Aloud I added, 'Yes, poor Mr. Bracy! He would so gladly have bought Stoke, no doubt. Well, it is in the market still, for they say times are bad for selling country-houses; especially one so far from any town or railroad, or what most people think make a country residence "de-

sirable." Let us hope he may still make money enough to get his wish, for it *was* tantalizing.'

'Was it not?—and yet he never complained one word !' exclaimed Mrs. Gladman, speaking of her favourite with such eager sympathy, my heart warmed to her. 'Well, yes; he is becoming rich certainly; still to buy two places in two years besides his share in the Barn Farm would be, I fear,—well, *too* much ; not that I meant any pun. And I am quite relieved, dear Pleasance, that you don't mind giving up Fulke Bracy to Rose ; for although a girl may not quite wish to marry a man herself; still when he has paid her attention and all that, she often feels hurt a little when he goes after somebody else.'

Which was a rather true remark, it seemed to me, on the part of Mrs. Gladman.

## CHAPTER VII.

TWO evenings later, I was idling in the untidy, picturesque Devonshire farm-yard, watching my god-mother's housewifely figure as she dispensed corn among a fluttering, cackling group of cocks and hens, grey goslings, galinis, and turkey-poults. How pretty it was, as I looked around from my seat on an old moorstone trough that had rested under its tiny thatched pump-shed while generations of Gladmans had lived in the warm, brown homestead in front! Grey moorstone buildings of all sizes stood around, with brown thatched roofs, each seeming heavier than the other, and adorned with

various growths of coloured lichens, house-leek, or tiny ferns, according to their respective age.

One side of the court-yard was bounded by a wall, whether originally made of mud or rubble I never knew; but it, likewise, was topped by a funny little thatched roof of its own, above which again rose cherry branches delicately outlined against the evening sky. From behind the wall came voices singing together, that of a man and a maid, in a measured slow lilt. Mrs. Gladman flung all her corn down in a heap.

‘Why! there are John and Rose. Come and join them, Pleasance, dear; they will be glad to have you, I am sure.’

We picked our way among the swine-troughs and the black grunting herd around them, and down the rough slope of the yard

by the brown duck-pond to the garden-door. Inside, among the hedges of sweet-peas, hiding plots of humbler vegetables, the cobble-stoned paths and straight borders of trailing nasturtium, hollyhocks, pinks, and all such autumn flowers, were set a few tall, spreading fruit-trees. Under the largest of these, John Gladman was slowly swinging Rose back and forward with an air of vast enjoyment, while they trolled out together the old Devonshire song :

‘ Oh, I went to the fair with a heart all so merry,—

Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee ;

And I bought a gay ribbon as red as a cherry,

For the girl I loved best, and who vowed to love me.

I returned from the fair gaily whistling and singing,

My true lover’s-knot I in triumph was bringing,

But it was not for *me* that I heard the bells ringing,—

Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee.

‘ I found she was false, tho’ she promised me fairly,—

Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee ;

For women, I trow, are like weatherecks, rarely

They fix on one point, so coquettish they be.

My true lover's-knot I away was now flinging,  
I've done with the sex, I live single and singing,  
Oh, it was not for me that I heard the bells ringing,—  
Sing hey down, ho down. . . .'

John's voice, that had taken quite a pathetic depth of sound at the last lines, suddenly broke down short as both perceived us. Rose sprang out of her seat as lightly as a kitten.

'Come along, Pleasance dear, and have a swing: it's such fun,' she cried, her eyes dancing.

'Yes, do, dear,' urged my god-mother from behind. 'John has given Rose a turn, so now he will want to give you yours. Won't you, John?'

'Oh, yes: won't you, Pleasance?' echoed the young man, blushing with an air of confusion, to my surprise, and looking at me with round pleading eyes.

‘I never did care to swing, thank you, John: it makes me giddy.’

‘Perhaps—would you—do you care to come and see the pigs fed? No?’ (as I gave a little dissenting shake of the head, much preferring the pretty garden and Mrs. Gladman’s stout arm to which I held).

‘Well, Rose will come anyhow. She always does; don’t you, Rose?’

‘Not this evening, my boy,’ interrupted his mother with a sunny meaning smile. ‘I want both girls to go up the lane as far as the stile and see what is coming; or whether anything is coming along the road to Wheatfield Farm.’

‘You expect something important, then? No, some one!—I can see it in your face. Who is it?—What is it? Oh, you dear mysterious soul, do tell us,’ cried Rose and

I assailing her with questions. But Mrs. Gladman would not answer a word; but fairly ran away, though scant of breath, only calling back:

‘Do as I tell you both now. Go up the lane to the stile—and wait till you see something.’

Whereupon she vanished cleverly behind the shippen, and Rose and I were left looking at each other. Lo and behold!—John had gone too. Marvelling much what this mystery might mean, we both concluded it would be best to do our good hostess’s bidding, so took our way up the steep winding lane between the farm-meadows to the stile at the top. The high banks of the lane were all thick-set with flowers and ferns, and made still higher by a wildly luxuriant growth a-top of holly, mountain ash, with glorious clusters of

scarlet berries flaming from afar, all interwoven with bronze trails of brier and bramble and glistening green wreaths of bryony and bindweed, flung from branch to branch with all Nature's almost wasteful prodigality of beauty in happy Devonshire. Nevertheless, as grumblers say, the only views to be had in them is over every gate. Luckily, we were bidden to wait up at the stile, where was a lovely prospect of the valley.

‘I can't think who it could be, except perhaps Mr. Bracy. He might be coming,’ said Rose, with a rather conscious look, as we wandered together.

‘Ah!’ said I musingly, ‘I wonder; could it be?’ Then after a pause, with a careless inquiring air, ‘How do you really like Mr. Bracy, now that you have seen so much more of him?’

‘ Oh, very, *very* much,’ returned Rose, with emphasis. ‘ I am sure that the more you knew him, the better you would like him, too, Pleasance, dear. He is so kind, so true ; *he* would never change.’

‘ Yes, I daresay he is all that,’ I answered, in a dream.

‘ How coldly you say it ! I declare you don’t deserve to be called a friend of his,’ exclaimed Rose pettishly. Slipping down from her seat on the stile, being like a bright little bit of perpetual motion, she began flitting about to gather flowers for the supper-table. I, less practical, still sat on the topmost bar, inwardly ashamed of myself, for it was quite true that all warmth and life had seemed to die out of my voice in speaking of Fulke Bracy. Ah ! the truth was, that during the year and a half of my dreary life in London, I

had been silly enough to think in that loneliness of Fulke Bracy's attachment as always enduring: to turn to it in thought as the one cheering point of light steadily shining over the twilight waste marshes and dawnless grey cheerlessness of life. A year and a half! . . . How could I forget a man's fancy must change? Nay, to be fair, his heart would require something warmer than the mere cool offer I had last made him at the Barn, of friendship—at a distance.

'Ay, we were fools, we Maries twain, and thought  
To be into the summer back again,  
And see the broom glow in the golden world,—  
The gentle broom on hill.'

Then I tried to examine myself as to how I really felt on this surprising new state of things being so suddenly revealed. Without doubt, I had not wished to marry Fulke

Bracy when we parted at the Barn that wet, sunny March morning: yet was assuredly conscious of a secret dog-in-the-manger feeling having so taken me aback, that I was stricken dumb on the hill-side when Mrs. Gladman told her news. Fulke and Rose! It was the new strangeness of the combination that had so affected me, now when I came to think of it; for it was impossible that I should grudge my best friend to my dear little sister, or her to him. But then, it was almost irritating, in a small way, to remember how Rose had laughed at him in those days; said he was too lofty for her, with his gentle manner recalling a long line of ancestors, and the rather haughty carriage of his head suggesting the pride of fallen fortunes. And in those days, too, he had never seemed to think of Rose at

all; except, indeed, as my sister. While now. . .?

What use, Pleasance Brown, in tormenting oneself thinking over the all that *was*! Be brave, and look what *is* in the face! Therewith, I swallowed a large sigh, and with one supreme effort shut out secret thoughts of Fulke, thenceforth with all my heart renouncing him to my dear little sister, with as much humble cheerfulness as may be ordered at will.

Then, while so sitting, the calm beauty of the summer evening stole into my soul with peace; and so, moment by moment, any still jarring sense of discord was hushed and laid to rest.

How fair it all was! Above, the large, cool, blue evening sky, and all around gorges and hills, softly veiled in haze and shadow.

On the further side of the road, one gate in the thick hedge gave a peep of a field in which poppies flamed amongst dark-red clover, making a perfect jubilee of colour. From this other gate whereon I sat, was a view of the river winding far below, between flat buttercup meadows; where midway the miller's red cows were standing knee-deep in the ford by the stepping-stones. Now and again, some of the villagers came down the lane, or a tired farmer jogging home on his pony. And they all wished us 'good evening' in the friendly Devonshire way. Presently Rose tripped back to me, her hands, that had been busy as usual, full of flowers and ferns; then she suddenly exclaimed :

'Look, look! there is a little cloud of dust far off on the Moreton road. Don't you see it?'

‘No. I can’t see anything at all. . . . Look again, Rose. This is like,—“Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anything coming?”’

Rose perched herself beside me, and gazed at the stony road winding like a white ribbon down an opposite hill, that was studded with fir-trees and strewn with boulders.

‘Yes. There is certainly something coming . . . two somethings. . . two black specks. Wait till they come down below us, into the valley.’

For the road, after dipping into the glen and crossing the river, wound by the Teign side for a little way under our hill; and so any passers-by were visible till, on beginning the steep zigzagging ascent of the lane, they would be lost to view between its high banks, until close upon us.

‘Now they are down at the bridge!’ I said, straining my eyes. ‘What is it, Rose—a dog-cart? Yes, it must be a dog-cart: what smart visitor can be coming in that? And surely there is a rider behind.’

Rose, who had the longest eyesight I ever knew, was silently looking. She burst now into a strange little laugh.

‘What is it? Don’t be so impatient, Pleasance! Why, it’s a *butcher’s cart*, my dear! “That is all and nothing more,” as the song of the raven says,—ha, ha.’

‘Is that all?’ said I indifferently, still looking too, though my misty brown vision could distinguish nothing clearly, albeit my eyes were large enough. ‘But who is the man riding, do you think?’

‘Well, he is keeping close company with the butcher’s cart, so birds of a feather

should flock together. Ha, ha ; fancy our watching for a spring-cart.'

'I'll watch no more. The Moreton butcher and some farmer, no doubt. I wonder they amuse you, Rose?'

So saying, I began with dignity to arrange our flowers into artistic bunches ; though Rose, who had jumped down, kept watching the nearest corner of the lane with head outstretched and dancing eyes. Presently, we heard the wheels grinding, and curious ejaculations.

'Hi ! Hi ! Let me pass you, I say. I can see the girls sitting on the stile up there, and I want to have the first of it with them.'

'No, no, you bad boy ! The wheel is up on the bank already ; don't upset us ; you'll kiss them soon enough. Get up, Lazybones,

get up. Bracy, dig my umbrella into the old mare's ribs, will you? Merciful powers! what a lane!

Next instant, before I could collect my scattered thoughts, being always slow in speech and movement, even as I gazed with expectation and wonder there was a clatter! and round the corner with a rush came a big yellow horse on which sat a big young man with a rosy lop-sided face and yellow hair. Rose screamed aloud with ecstasy; most likely I did too; for with a scramble the rider had dismounted, and I found my cheeks heartily rasped by Bob's callow whiskers.

'Oh, Bob, Bob!' was all I could ejaculate, between laughing and crying.

'Isn't it jolly, eh?' was all he could find of wisdom to answer, whilst I patted his arm and he continued the hugging process. Then

looking up I saw that the butcher's cart had reached us and stopped, its occupants surveying us with deeply-interested amusement. I could not help laughing out loud at sight of them, for surely a stranger pair never sat in such a vehicle—my grand-aunt Miss Beaumanoir, and Mr. Bracy! Behind them, the cart was piled with portmanteaus and a significant-looking bag from which protruded a shin of beef; in front of which they sat with a calm air of proprietorship. Fulke was faultlessly well-dressed as usual; Aunt Bee perhaps looking more wizened and witch-like in her everlasting old garments, but her black eyes as kind and quick as ever.

A right merry meeting and hand-shaking that was in the dusty road; while cross question and crooked answers were interchanged with lively fire.

‘Come for a real good visit, Pleasance!’ cried the March Hare, waving his arms wildly like a windmill. ‘Oh, rather—what a fool you are!—be quiet, do.’ (This was to Dandelion, his horse, who had plunged; not inexcusably.)

‘But we’re none of us going to stay with you at the Farm, so don’t flatter yourselves,’ put in our grand-aunt, eyeing us with an amused satisfaction quite wicked in such an old woman.

‘Don’t be distressed. They will only be half-a-mile off at my cottage. You know I have become a landed proprietor down here in a small way, Miss Brown,’ said Fulke Bracy, laughing at our depressed faces.

‘Why, you’ll want the spare rooms at the Farm for all the other guests. When are the revelries to begin, Pleasance?’

‘Oh, who else is coming, Bob, dear?’

Not surely mother?' in a joyful tone, remembering a curious restraint in Mrs. Gladman's manner, when, on the coming of the last letter from the poky little house on Camden Hill, I had grieved myself over my mother's inscrutable silence as to her plans for the autumn; having hoped Alice would have invited her for country air to Broadhams.

'The mother? Of course she is coming,' echoed Bob; 'and so you knew nothing about it all; oh, glorious! Why it's all been got up for *you*. Even your friend Amy Pawlett coming too. Oh, my eye! what a beauty of a trout rose just as we crossed the bridge.'

'Yes, child,' said my grand-aunt, breaking in. 'Your god-mother, who is a woman after my own heart, thought you had been dull for so long, that she settled this with us all, and bound us over to secrecy. Now, good chil-

dren, march on to the Farm. I want some supper.'

'And what of Amy Pawlett?' I asked, still bewildered, as we went chattering homewards to the Farm.

'That I can explain,' put in Rose. 'You know that Mrs. Gladman came up to town last May, for a week, to see the Academy and buy a summer bonnet. Well, she paid Alice and me a visit one day when the Pawletts were there, and Amy began talking so affectionately of you that Mrs. Gladman invited her there and then for August. Of course she was delighted; but Lady Pawlett would never have given her so long a holiday (now Charlotte is gone into a sisterhood), except that her Ladyship wanted to be off to Homburg with as little expense as possible, and preferred taking her maid to her daughter.'

‘Poor Amy! Yes, she came twice to see me in London; Lady Pawlett was not pleased about it. But why all this should be done for me, is more than I can understand,’ I murmured, feeling really rather overcome at such unexpected goodness.

‘No, very likely you can’t; but your friends can,’ said Fulke Bracy, with his old kind voice.

Next moment Rose turned, and as her eyes met his there was such a mutually understanding glance between them that my heart—in spite of previous good resolutions—felt quite sick. But only for an instant or two! no more. Very soon I was laughing with the rest, as we went homewards all crowded round the butcher’s cart, while Fulke Bracy led Lazybones, my grand-aunt’s old mare.

‘And where did you beg, or borrow, or

steal your triumphal chariot?' Rose pertly asked.

'We hired it, Miss, at Moreton, where my old gig broke down, and a very good conveyance too, for a lady ought to feel herself such if she rides in a wheelbarrow; besides, we obliged both the butcher and Mrs. Gladman by bringing over that beef for her,' quoth my grand-aunt, with a grimace that expressed defiance of formalities. 'But, Bracy, I still think it a great pity you would not let me go two miles out of our way to see the Ownalls. You are too proud, my good man.'

'Be both my judge and advocate, Miss Pleasance,' said that proud man, laughing as he turned to me. 'I assure you, I was delighted to please Miss Beaumanoir by visiting several local magnates, whilst we

were in the old gig. But to drive up to the door of a marquis, and the lord-lieutenant of the county, in a butcher's cart ; *that* really was a call I thought uncalled for.'

The Farm now came in sight, and Mrs. Gladman standing by the gate, her whole face and person exhaling a gentle *aura* of welcome. Behind her, John seemed so brimming over with smiles that his superfluous satisfaction had to vent itself in extraordinary contortions of the shoulders, as he held the top bar with both hands.

Through the trim garden-plot we all trooped, up the cobble-stoned path into the cool stone entry of the old dwelling-house. The doors of the pleasant parlours to right and left were set invitingly open, as were the windows ; so that moorland freshness and heather scents seemed to pervade the

whole household. And what a glorious supper we had together that evening! How pleasantly we chatted outside afterwards in the summer dusk, till, later again, the three new-comers went away to the Artist's Cottage; as Fulke's little home had been called since, thirty years ago, the first wandering artist who ever found out the charms of the valley, had stayed there awhile and sketched, to the rustic wonderment.

‘Good night,’ said he to me as we stood together under the starry sky at the gate. ‘But why not come with us a little way? Your sister is coming,’—with a slight emphasis.

‘Yes, Rose will go; but I think I had better stay at home to-night,’ was my evasively-murmured reply, withdrawing my hand.

‘At home,’ he echoed.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Gladman behind me, ‘I am glad dear Pleasance looks on the Farm as home.’

It is something to be ashamed of when one sister cannot stand by, and see the happiness of another, without heaviness of heart; and a wish to turn away and not look upon it. Well, to-morrow; yes, certainly to-morrow, I would be stronger. This one evening, at least, let me stay alone and fight out the fight that must be won against the selfishness and envy that kept uprising in my soul.

The gay departing voices died away down the lane in the sweet darkness. Mrs. Gladman had left me to go indoors and give some orders to Mary Munch, her faithful coadjutor and cook. I was alone and thinking.

Those few words of my good god-mother's about my home being at Wheatfield Farm, was food enough for many thoughts.

Fulke Bracy's look at Rose, the meaning in his voice when he said *she* would go down the lane with them, was again before my eyes, sounded in my ears. My brain was in a whirl. How dreadful it is to feel the dull first workings of that sick pain of jealousy, affecting even the body through the brain, which may grow at last to such agonies ! Who was it truly said, 'The jealous are the damned.'

I laid my head down on the rail of the gate, and could have laughed at my own foolishness softly ; but then I would very gladly have cried.

Well, well : recovering myself and staring away into the darkness, with a renewed

wave of strength of purpose, facts must be looked in the face.

My god-mother wished me to stay at the Farm a long time; she wished me to think it my home. I should be indebted to John Gladman for bread and salt, and ought to be *glad* he gave it me, my mother being so miserably poor; for though, with the instincts of a lady, I longed to work at anything rather than be beholden to any one, what could the fingers of a lady do? Be a governess; a companion? I was hardly clever enough, accomplished enough, for either over-stocked class. A lady-help, —a children's caretaker? One's heart sank at the menial tasks, the terrible change of daily life habits, companionship involved. Sew for livelihood, and still keep my own soul free? Had I not sewn and sewn in London

till my eyes failed and my fingers were sore ? and how little, alas ! how little had been the gain to me, the ease to my mother !

But then in what a net the meshes of circumstances and affections would have involved me (with useless pain to all concerned), if, in the days to come, John Gladman were to come and ask me, in return for his goodness, and because of his great affection for his mother, and hers for me ? . . . Up the lane at that moment sounded returning voices ; those of good John and my little sister. He was singing rather pathetically, having a fine manly voice,—

‘ But it was not for *me* that I heard the bells ringing ’—while Rose followed in a merry twitter, void of care,—

‘ Sing, hey down, ho down, derry down dee ! ’

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE revelries at the Farm had begun.

The coach from Yeoford had set down in turn my mother and Amy Pawlett at the trim gate of Wheatfield Farm. A healthy, hearty spirit of happiness had taken such hold of us all, who had been now for some days regaled on home-made bread and Devonshire cream, on junkets, and the glorious moorland air, that our warmth of hospitable reception made both late-comers enter easily into the simple Arcadian life we had established : and feel made free of the noble oak-woods and brawling trout-streams in the valleys, the miles of heather moors with their jutting tors,

the Druid cromlechs and stone-circles we others had all known and loved before.

Amy was no handsomer; still heavy and shy in manner and conversation, yet with such kindly gleams coming across her quiet features, now and again developing day by day into a steadily-increasing brightness while we all tried to cheer her, as it was a pleasure to see.

‘That girl Amy is positively learning to be happy,’ said old Aunt Bee, then, with one of her keen black glances at me, whom she had silently been watching a good deal in the past few days. ‘Being melancholy is as much a habit as anything else, I believe; don’t let it grow upon *you*, Pleasance.’

‘My dear aunt, I assure you, I try not,’ was my reply, rather startled.

‘Humph! Yes, I believe you do try. I

am sorry you have to try. It's a pity you could not have married Bracy when he wanted you! Well! I wonder at your taste, child; but there . . . I verily believe women can't help themselves as to likings.'

We two sat alone together, though voices and laughter a little way off, told where the rest were fishing. But my old grand-aunt had crept away with unusual, almost suspicious, solitariness to this sunny nook, sheltered among boulders and trees. Her gait struck me as so lame and withered this day that I followed her, though she reiterated with a pleased impatience:

'Go back, Pleasance; go back to the other young folk. All I want is warmth for my old bones, and quiet.'

Now I said after a pause—it seemed a long pause; a grasshopper had chirped and a

bee gone by with a heavy-laden buzz: 'I don't want to marry, Aunt Bee.'

'Well, child; . . . you may be none the less happy for that. Look at me; live as I did.'

Another silence. My lips curved with sorrowful amusement; how could I ever become like Aunt Bee?

A merry, mocking laugh sounded shrilly towards us from the nearest thicket, by which the river gurgled.

'Oh, Mr. Bracy, I've caught such a beauty; bigger than yours. John, come and put a worm on for me. They wriggle so—I don't like it.

'That little chit, Rose! How all the men make much of her!' said Aunt Bee, with a cynical glance at me.

'Not only the men; women too,' I smiled,

believing she was trying to rouse my jealousy (and she had called up the tears indeed in my mind, if not in my eyes). For I had had such a cheery time of late, and dearly though I loved my little sister, it seemed hard it might not always be so. So I said: 'Rose always was my mother's darling, and even with Mrs. Gladman, too,—

'Not with me, Pleasance,' suddenly said the old lady, divining my thought, and laying a withered hand, not unlike a bird's claw, a moment on mine. 'Of course, I am very fond of Rose; but it is human nature for a young soul like you to wish to be first with some one. You are first with me, if that is any consolation; for I fear your little sister has supplanted you. . . But there! we won't speak about it, and here is your mother coming.'

My mother moved gently towards us, picking her steps over the broken ground with dainty care. How much more fitted she seemed to stroll in trim garden-walks, or take a gentle drive for exercise behind high-stepping horses, paying due afternoon calls, or playing Lady Bountiful to the parish ! Graceful as ever, yet her shoulders were now just a little bent ; gentle as ever, yet her manner was often a trifle indifferent, if not weary. Out on the wild moorland, or lower in the pleasant champaign country where the trout-streams brawled merrily through oak-wooded gorges, whilst we were all glad in the exhilaration of the mountain air, she moved among us like a being of another sphere. She was pleased to be with us all ; no doubt felt the change from penury and the mean little London house to the plentiful hospitality of

Wheatfield Farm as grateful, even more than was shown in her manner; yet her heart was far away, her mind absent.

She only really *lived* in the past; at Stoke with our dear father in the dead life once more; though all her present existence was devoted to the duties she owed her children. The one being whose even light doings or wishes could still rouse her to lively interest, was Beau, her idol—and now the pain of that maternal affection must too often have been greater than the pleasure.

As she came towards us at that moment, holding an open letter, her eyes were shining with pleasure; her figure looked slim, almost girlish again in her widow's dress. All the fishing party followed her; evidently she had imparted some great pleasure to them, and now came further to share it with us.

‘Beau is coming! — dear boy, he has written; inviting himself to the Farm; the one being wanted to complete the happiness of our party,’ she exclaimed, looking round in glad expectation of confirming applause.

We all tried to look pleased at her pleasure: — otherwise, the expressions of universal joy were awkward. Only Amy Pawlett murmured, with a new light in her eyes such as I had never noticed there before:

‘I am so glad! Is it not delightful?’

And Mrs. Gladman, with that calm, welcoming motherliness of hospitality which would have made her glad to extend her wings over, not only her friends, but her friends’ friends again, if possible—to the extremest limits of both accommodation and kindly feeling, answered:

‘Beaumanoir will be very welcome here, first, because he is his dear father’s son ; and he could have few stronger claims on us ; and afterwards, when we know him better, I hope, for his own sake.’

‘Yes ; you will like him ; every one does ! He is too much a favourite, perhaps, for his own success in life,’ my mother said with pride, yet a sigh. ‘He has been taking a little trip in Brittany with some other artists, but did not like to settle to work again without running down here for a few days ; ours seemed such a pleasant party, from my letters. . . . A few more days’ holiday will do him so much good,’ apologizingly. ‘He will be here to-morrow evening.’

My mother moved away, as if treading on air, since she had heard her good news. Mrs. Gladman and Amy Pawlett, kind souls,

who both shared her gladness from different motives, went too.

The rest of us looked at each other in silence. Then said old Miss Beaumanoir, tartly: ‘Humph, so this fine London gentleman arrives to-morrow evening, does he? . . Well, children, let us all go off to-morrow morning, for a good ramble and picnic, before he spoils our fun.’

We Browns, brother and sisters, gazed at our grand-aunt with the admiring air of guilty conspirators, who had not dared to speak out, as she did. Both Fulke Bracy and John, as men and no relations, looked discreetly away. But they, as well as we, hailed the idea with suspicious alacrity, notwithstanding.

## CHAPTER IX.

WHAT a warm and balmy September morning was that of our picnic !

We had gone into the great oak wood which covered the steeply-rising ground behind John Gladman's farm, and that spread irregularly down into little gorges and valleys in the heart of the hills. It was almost too warm still in the open glades, but the sunlight effects were charming, glinting through the trees, on brake and brambles, and glorious brown-gold bracken, in which the red Devon cattle stood shoulder-high here and there, chewing the cud, and staring at us with dark

eyes of gentle wonder. We all gathered ferns or mountain-ash berries as we went, to adorn the Farm on our home-coming. This spoil was heaped high in the donkey-chaise, which held the three elder ladies and the provisions, and that soon looked like a moving bower.

On one side of the chaise went Bob, chaffing and teasing Aunt Bee; on the other side demurely walked Amy, talking to my mother. Good girl, she was fondly and touchingly attentive to her.

All morning I had eagerly led the way, up hill and down dale, with John Gladman. This one day, I had vowed within myself, Fulke Bracy and Rose should thoroughly enjoy themselves; for when Beau came he was so ridiculously jealous of Fulke that . . .

Jealous!—that one word was a torch

lighting my own dark heart. For the miserable truth was, that in the last few days I had grown deadly jealous myself of my dear little sister. Oh, I struggled and strove against it, and yet could not help it. Each time my own especial old friend showed his new liking for Rose openly, it made me so sore-hearted and sick, I longed to creep away and be alone. With one great effort to be magnanimous, I had now begun the fight against my secret sin, never by word or look to betray myself or vex them, and more—carrying the war so far—that I even *sought* means to throw those two together. ‘Come on, John. Let us climb up to the Pixies’ Rock,’ said my persuasive tongue. We had struggled for a mile down the steep wood, pushing through thickets, catching in brambles, stumbling over roots and rocks, as I disdained the

cart-track; and now at last a lovely bit of sunny turf opened before us stretching up to a rocky mound, rough with brushwood, and crowned with great boulders.

‘Bless me, isn’t it very hot?’ meekly asked my poor squire, wiping his brow. ‘’Pon my honour, it’s queer that a slim pale girl like you should have so much spirit in her, Pleasance, when I’m nearly dead beat. I say—Bracy and Rose are not far behind us; I watched them as we came along; don’t you think we might wait for them?’

‘No, no. They don’t want us—and you can rest up there when we have lunch.’ So on we went, scrambling, toiling, and panting in the sun. How tired I was, and inwardly tempted to look back and *see* those others! But it was much better for myself to keep them out of sight. I was rather

sorry for poor John, too, who had tried occasional awkward attempts at gallantry, all of which had been promptly repulsed. To be made do my bidding all morning, yet not allowed to think himself favoured, was clearly puzzling.

Arrived at the summit, at last. I sank with a sigh of relief under the grateful shade of the Pixie Stones. These were great rocks cropping out from the greensward, seeming, like most tors, a pile of huge irregular slabs, placed a-top of each other, that seen from a distance took grotesque outlines.

‘There is the donkey-cart coming up the slope over yonder—the easiest way. They mean to have lunch on the fairies’ bowling-green. *Won’t* I be glad of it, just, after this climb?’ Poor John was puffing still, as he spoke with a sound of coming rapture and

a groan of manly pity for himself, after his late exertions.

‘Cheer up! You can sit and rest on that stone, John. After all, if you have tired yourself, it was to please me,’ was my consoling remark, purposely not uttered with too much tenderness.

‘Look here, Pleasance, I wonder now—whether you really *do* like me to please you.’

I gave a start. What on earth was my old playfellow, my good god-mother’s son, my kind host, going to say next? He had taken off his hat to mop his heated brows; and was now transfixing me with a gentle slow stare, that on his flushed face reminded one somehow of one of the red cattle down in the wood. With a woman’s first instinct in all dangers, I tried to cover my confusion by words.

‘Why, John, what do you mean? Any woman likes to be pleased in little things like this by any man;—don’t you know that? Besides, you and I have been such good friends for your mother’s sake. . .’

‘Yes, yes; that is just it. But even a mother’s wishes ought not to be everything in some matters. So when you asked me to walk on to-day and leave the others, I thought I would be glad to know what you really thought, yourself, of me, Pleasance—don’t you see?’

Hereupon, to hide embarrassment, John began kicking the ground so heavily, that it was well he wore the thickest of hob-nailed boots. This was a pretty plight; and all brought about by my misguided self-sacrifice!

‘Oh, John, how can you vex me so?’ I cried, feeling my eyes flash with resentment of his

stupidity, yet my voice unable to sound more than hurt, he stood so blushing and confused. 'I simply and only asked you to walk with me, because *I thought the others didn't want us*—there!'

'Well, if that is so, I'm sorry I spoke. I'm sorry, too, to have vexed you, Pleasance: such was never my intention, but quite the contrary. . . . However, I think I did the right thing, for honesty is the best policy. But as to the others not wanting us, I—don't—know—but what one man is as good as another.' With which oracular sentence, John Gladman slowly turned away and left me alone.

How mean and poor I felt! To have almost brought about a declaration from John, and annoyed him; annoyed myself; annoyed my good god-mother! Well, well, it was for the sake of Rose and *Mr.*

*Bracy.* . . So I sat alone and thought what a coil was here, and how would it end; would it be better to go away?

Now, I liked John dearly, and the life at the Farm, too. I should not have minded, all the rest of my days, pouring out the good fellow his tea; cutting him bread and butter off the big, home-made loaves; or even darning his socks of an evening. But to do this of free will was one thing; to accept it as a duty to John, another. Besides, like other imperfect ordinary men, he had his fits of crossness, when his mare had a sore back, or the farm-bailiff had put the sheep into a wrong field, and in such moments of human frailty he would speak surlily even to his mother. Well! did Pleasance Brown *love* good John, she could very meekly bear this, knowing his honest brow would soon relax.

But—only liking him—and being a fastidious, sensitive woman, might she not become angered, too? worse!—go on to pick secret faults with his bluff country manners, his lazy voice, and round good-humoured but not much-thinking face. All which traits, I well knew, that given a little true affection, my mind would soon, womanly fashion, train itself into regarding, first, as forgivably characteristic; next, as dear to me personally; lastly, as pleasant, perhaps even adorable.

But then affection will not come at will; of all growths it is shyest and most capricious in choosing where it will strike root.

So I was sitting, sorry and solitary enough, when round the rocks came Rose, her eyes alight, but not, it seemed, with pleasure.

‘Oh, Pleasance, so here you are at last! Well, I *do* think you need hardly have gone

right away from us all the morning, as you did—you must have heard us calling you both, and I—I—I—call it really *unkind*, so I do. Mr. Bracy thought it very strange—that I can tell you.’

‘But, Rose, I only did it fancying it would please you. My dear! you can’t think anything else?’

‘Think! I did think it was so ostentatious! Such a marked way of showing what you wished,’ cried Rose, fuming in a little storm of strange anger. ‘Oh, people may be very fond of each other, still I, for one, would always consider appearances, especially before men. But then, thank goodness! I never was romantic or impulsive myself.’

‘Rose. . .’ The tears were fairly in my eyes now. It did seem too hard; after my secret self-sacrifice. But my voice had gone

straight home to my sister's warm if hasty little heart.

‘Forgive me, my poor patient Pleasance. Don't mind what I said, dear—please—*please*.’

‘But, Rose, you must know best. If you think that for appearance' sake . . .’

‘Yes, that's just it: for appearance' sake, you know,’ echoed Rose, drying her own eyes, though why she had quarrelled and cried with me seemed hard to tell. Only our sex in love, I reflected, are ridiculously ready to be nervous and cry at anything; witness myself in secret.

‘I'll talk to Mr. Bracy, then, this afternoon; if you wish it,’ I continued, with a sudden upleaping of my heart, yet feeling sad enough next moment, heaven knows!

‘Pleasance, you are an angel! If you

don't really mind, dear, just only for this one afternoon. . . . I'll never ask you again, you may be sure of that.'

Away went my sister, seeming unusually subdued but satisfied, all her plumes smoothed again. What a contradictory little mortal she was ! But I concluded she had somehow fallen out with that kindest and best of men—my old friend, Mr. Fulke.

It is pleasant, after being healthfully tired, to rest couched in the golden bracken that is a glory on the hill-side, on a rarely beautiful summer's afternoon.

' Oh gift of God ! Oh perfect day :  
Whereon shall no man work, but play ;  
Whereon it is enough for me,  
Not to be doing, but to be ! '

It is more pleasant still, when close by on the turf, enjoying the same large blue sky

bending over us, and the fair violet hills across the green valley, thinking with oneself, speaking all to oneself now and again, looking up in one's eyes, is the kindest, best, truest man of men one has ever known.

What Fulke Bracy and I talked of all that long summer's day it were hard to say ; only I know I was almost perfectly happy. There was no treason to Rose. She herself had ordained my stolen happiness. Strange enough, that Fulke seemed to enjoy himself as much ! But then, through relief of feeling, I showed an undisguised pleasure in his society that perhaps helped to beget pleasure : and a man can be ' happy with either,' when a woman can—not.

But, afterwards, I always remembered how when we chanced to speak of his pretty cottage, just visible two miles below us, near

one of the curves of the winding Teign ; and in remorse I seized the long-looked for chance to exclaim :

‘ Ah, yes, it is pretty, as you say, and no doubt endeared by associations of your mother. But still it is not Stoke ! Oh, Mr. Bracy, I regret so bitterly you ever offered to join Bob in farming at the Barn. It was generous, self-sacrificing ; but if you had not buried your money in the ground there you could have bought back *your* old home.’

Such a gleam of friendship, of almost consolation, from the kind grey eyes opposite met my sorrowful glance, that I knew we were both touched to full sympathy.

‘ Don’t think any more about that Fate was against me ; that is all,’ said Fulke softly. Then smiling at me : ‘ And as to burying my money, why ! it is coming up

again in splendid crops. You should see the Barn *now*—you would hardly know it again. Bob and I will make a small fortune out of it some day. He is a splendid partner; always cheery, always hard-working. No: I can never regret having helped him, and I believe that henceforth he will always be able to keep himself well afloat.’ Then musingly, after a pause: ‘I only wish for the sake of others besides him, that the robbery and neglect of your grand-aunt’s property had been stopped years ago; or that she had more than the Barn itself to leave to you and yours.’

‘That is hopeless,’ I sighed. ‘You know when the fire broke out at the Barn, all her fortune, which she had made over in notes to my grandfather that very day, hoping to save the family property—was burnt.’

‘Was the money burnt, or lost?—that is the

question. Sir Reginald Beaumanoir, being in ill-health, and harassed by difficulties, caught a chill that night, they say, and died in a very few hours of that and the shock. He had just strength and sense enough left before death to tell his sister he rejoiced her money was safe, as her generous sacrifice was now useless. Then he recommended his infant daughter, your mother, to her care, and so he died. But though he knew most of the Baron's Stay was destroyed by that night's fire, no thought of this money being lost seems to have crossed his mind.'

'Why, you know all the story. It has hardly been spoken of since we were children,' I exclaimed, surprised.

'Yes, I know it well. Indeed, for years, I may own to having tried, by every possible means, to trace that money, for friendship's

sake to your old aunt. It was in Bank of England notes for five hundred each, the numbers of which were known,' said Mr. Bracy, in a matter-of-fact tone of musing regret at his failure, evidently considering his self-imposed task quite an ordinary act. 'Well, I had almost given up the idea, too, when your grand-aunt revived it strangely the other day, by hoping the money might yet be found before she died.'

'Good heavens, Mr. Bracy!—You don't think Aunt Bee is ill, that she is likely to die?'

'A very woman!—jumping at once to the wildest conclusions. I don't think anything of the sort; in fact, I believe I am beginning to—

'Think that nought is worth a thought,  
And I'm a fool for thinking.'

But, by the way, what o'clock do you think it is ?'

'I haven't an idea. But it can't be late, for there is John Gladman still picking blackberries for Rose, and he is as punctual as an eight-day clock, for his meals.'

'It wants just three-quarters of an hour to supper !' We sprang to our feet in dismay ; and this time it was we who called the other twain.

When we all reached the Farm, Beau had arrived. But as Mrs. Gladman indulgently remarked, she knew at lunch we had all had such a pleasant morning that no doubt the afternoon had been the same ! Dear soul—not quite the same !

## CHAPTER X.

OF all the Dartmoor valleys, surely none can compare in loveliness with Fingle Gorge, that down at its lower end has even a touch of the sublime; where Cranbrook and Prestonbury Hills rise and confront each other grandly across the narrow pass, one in naked brownness, the other darkly clothed with wood.

‘Why this is very fine! Really, Mrs. Gladman, I had no idea there was anything so fine in this part of the world,’ cried Beau, as we all went along the gorge by a narrow path midway on the steep hill-side.

‘Hang him! Why he isn’t satisfied with

patronizing us all, but he must be patting nature on the back now, too,' growled Bob, who was close behind me.

'Oh, hush, Bob,' I murmured. 'Don't you see how happy mother is; she can't take her eyes off him? He cannot help his nature after all. And we ought to be very glad he is so pleased with himself always, and with Dartmoor now,—poor Beau!'

'Poor Beau!' mimicked my younger brother still angrily. 'As if life was harder for him than others! But because a fellow is handsome and idle, you women must needs pamper and pity him—and make him only a spoilt fine gentleman.'

Thus grumbling, Bob strode ahead, calling out, 'I say, Amy, the rest are all so slow! Won't you come on with me to the bridge?' But Amy, who was walking demurely on

Beau's other side, in company with my mother, had her eyes and whole stolidly simple being so entirely engrossed by our handsome elder brother, she did not even notice his call ; till Beau laughing answered for her with lordly lightness :

‘ No, no ! go on by yourself, my good lad. We can't spare Miss Pawlett.’ And poor Amy, becoming aware of her own absence of mind, blushed over her brown plain face, but looked so pleased at the idea of Beau wanting her, it almost made her handsome.

I felt quite sorry, watching it all. Plainly Beau was no fallen star of fashion in Amy's eyes ; but like an honest girl she liked him as much as when he was heir to his fair western home, and was petted and courted by far lovelier women, who now—forgot him. Her humble incense was no doubt grateful at

this deserted shrine, for Beau now continued all that afternoon to pay her extravagant attention. It seemed to amuse him, thus to flutter poor Amy, and madden Bob, who, no doubt, disliked seeing his usual companion appropriated and ‘made a fool of.’ It was an Arcadian diversion, suitable to Wheatfield Farm and moor-life; just as in London he tried to put on Bohemianism, — poor Beau!

As to the rest of us, Rose and I kept side by side, as ever since the day of our misunderstanding in the oak woods we had silently done. What was her secret motive, I felt shy of asking. Mine was the fear of somehow again playing a wrong part in those relations between Fulke Bracy and herself, that were so inexplicable (as generally happens) to all, excepting those most concerned.

As usual, John Gladman and his friend Bracy were beside us. The latter chatted with Rose. Afterwards, I could not remember that he ever directly addressed me. Only if I said anything, however trivial, to either of the others, I saw he took notice of it even though they might not; and if I coveted a special wild-flower by the path he seemed to divine so, and would give it me without being asked. His eyes seemed to read the wishes in mine; mine silently thanked him. It was a strange footing of tacit intimacy, a secret sweetness that frightened yet allured me.

How beautiful that walk was! Still I remember it after the lapse of years, as I heard the others chatter and went with them strange and silent, but happy in the present, not daring to think of the future—feeling

rather than seeing at times the look that seemed to say, 'I understand you; you have a friend left in the world.' But he did not understand me then:—no, no: not quite. He understood Rose.

The bare hill, along the steep side of which we went, was here at Sharpitor's rugged point all a sweet flush of violet heather, shading into soft brown. Across the gorge rose up thick green oak woods to an equal height. They seemed moving with us as we went as if walking in air on our high and narrow path, winding by curve and cliff—a curious feeling. Here and there, as we peered down, shaggy Dartmoor ponies could be seen grazing on the steep slopes, burnt so slippery with summer drought it was a wonder they found foothold. And, still further below, the Teign could be seen now and again frothing in

gleams through the alders and greenwood. It could be better heard, now brawling hoarse by its great Logan-stone and fallen boulders, now tinkling with that gentle river murmur that ears long attuned thereto, listen for with longing as for a well-loved charm.

What part of England can compare with Devonshire? Its breezy, health-giving moors, where the herds of red cattle and the half-wild ponies are often the only living creatures to be seen in leagues of yellow gorse and sweet heather: the deep lanes, that as the old song on them truly says—

‘ With bud, blossom, berry are richly besprent ’—

the open glades where glowing red campion and blue-bells mingle in masses of such vivid colour as startle our eyes, accustomed to the usual more sober English green and

grey hues of landscape and sky; the streams that brawl and babble down the valleys; the solemn great rocks, once Druid altars. Then here is the home of ferns, from the fairy tribes fringing every rough stone wall with delicate green, to the great and worshipful lady-ferns growing in cool damp spots in the deep woods, in such palm-like beauty as is elsewhere undreamed of.

We had tea at an old mill, not far from Fingle Bridge. Leaning idly afterwards on the moor-stone parapet of the bridge, in the niches built wisely, long ago, for foot-folk to avoid passing pack-horses, or a waggon broadly laden, (the bridge being but narrow,) we watched the stream.

‘What is the charm of running water, I wonder? It seems to draw one’s gaze, and to keep it always.’

‘It is the movement of life in the earth ; the same as the secret of Spring. One seems to see one of the pulses of Nature beating,’ said Fulke Bracy.

‘It’s to watch for trout . . . aw, at least that’s why *I* like to look over here,’ said John good-humouredly and loudly at the same moment from the other side.

‘It makes me think of all sorts of things,’ cried Bob ; ‘especially of our jolly days here long ago. Eh, Bracy—eh, Pleasance?’ We two named smiled at each other.

The March Hare was leaning with half his body over the parapet, gloating in ecstasy at all the sprite-like finny forms, that as you watched would quiver and flicker over the sunlit gravelly shallows, like little shadows, disappearing from view in the deeper brown water. Bless him ! he recalled to our

memory every sunny open, each clump of willows or alders, all along the winding Teign from here up past Chagford bridge with its village beyond the meadows; by Holy Street trees and rocks, with their memories of the Druids, and old mill beloved of artists; to the woods of beautiful Gidleigh, where the little river comes down from the moor beyond through a pass so full of big rocks, and little rocks, and trees, that it is well-nigh impassable.

‘My eyes! there rose a beauty,’ cried Bob, as a larger fish than usual sprang up, showing his silvery side, and dropped again. ‘Somehow this makes me think of the last good day’s fishing I ever had, at home—at dear old Stoke. St. Leger was one of us, and you, Beau. I remember he got tired of it very early, and went away

home like an idiot—though he was a good fisherman.’

‘He got badly hooked himself. Eh! Pleasance, have you heard the end of our mutual friend Clair and the fair Jenny, his spouse?’ said Beau, with a jeering laugh.

‘No; what is it? I have heard almost nothing of them for a year,’ said I quietly; though had there been a sore spot in my heart left, Beau’s tone would have been as hot iron to it. Beside me, Mr. Bracy looked far away, as I was well aware: it was kind of him, but he need not have done so.

‘The so-called Begum is a Begum no more; that you all know probably, and how she lost all she was worth, in the most literal sense (namely, her money). But the latest news is, that she has become, at least, a *grass widow* once more. Poor Clair found

her temper so unbearable without her income, that they first agreed to differ, and then finally to part. So, as she pleases to live at his home, and that she drives him out of his senses, he has scraped up all he could, and joined some other fellows, for a good time in the Rockies. Deuced hard, to be done out of the old woman's fortune in that way !'

'Serve him right, when he sold himself,' cried Bob, flushing in indignation, while John slowly added a 'Yes ; just so,' and Rose vivaciously echoed, with a 'yes—just so, indeed !'

'I don't see it. Every man is bound to do the best he can for himself,' retorted Beau. 'All I can say, is, if I get the chance of marrying any woman with a fortune, that would keep me as her lord and master in

ease, won't I just snatch at it—that's all !  
Money, money, that's the main thing.'

There was a silence after this. Poor Amy shrank into herself, as if her short-lived joy was withered. My mother looked pained : she thought, no doubt, of Alice. We all felt jarred, more or less, by Beau's tone and words, as if among the gentle Arcadians he thought us, had come a sneering cynic from the great cruel world, where he had learned—

‘ the hideous trick

Of laughing at whate'er is great or holy.’

Fulke Bracy broke the uneasy spell by telling Mrs. Gladman, in his pleasantly masterful way, that it was time to go home. My silent blessing was upon him, always ready to help others in great troubles or in little difficulties. To quote Charles the Second's famous epigram, he was certainly

‘never in the way, and never out of the way.’

On the homeward path, I said little to any one ; yet, while my eyes strayed, as if heedful of nothing else, now on the green gorge below us with the ribbon of water half-hidden in its heart, now on the breezy, honeyed, heather slopes rising on our right, whence the bees were taking their last heavy evening flight, I was thinking and wondering to myself on something nearer even than this fair nature—my own woman’s heart. The old refrain, ‘How did I know I should love him now, whom that day I held not dear?’—the wonder that so many other women must have felt, who were loved, and loved others, through the many bygone ages. How could one have been so blind to this man’s perfections in the past? And now it was *too late!*

None of the rest said very much either. Even Rose's chirrup was hushed; though, like the ever busy bee she was, her little hands were slowly arranging great bunches of heather which John Gladman and Mr. Bracy vied in gathering for the self-elected young housekeeper of Wheatfield Farm.

Only Beau was irrepressibly gay. As if partly conscious of our different feelings, and amused by his Mephistophelian *rôle*, with a sense of evil-joy, he rallied most of us in turn; then laughing at our discomfiture, hummed snatches of French songs. I caught the words now and again of de Musset's '*Tout s'en va comme la fumée.*'

‘Mais que dis-je ? ainsi va le monde.

. . . . .

Ferme tes yeux, tes bras, ton âme ;

Adieu ma vie, adieu Madame,

Ainsi va le monde ici-bas.’

At last Mr. Bracy, coming up beside me, said in a quiet under-tone :

‘What wild spirits your brother is in to-day!’

‘Yes. I wish he was not quite so much so,’—with a sigh.

‘He vexed you ; I am so sorry.’ This was in a still lower, kindlier tone, through which sounded a fine vein of such curiously-regretful sympathy that I divined what was in his mind, at once.

‘You think I was hurt about Mr. St. Leger. No ; no—what I told you before is more then ever true now,—that he is quite dead to me, and passed out of my life. Thank you ! I saw you felt for me. But as you have always been such a good friend, look me in the eyes now ; and see for yourself that I can say most honestly, I am sorry for

Clair St. Leger, but otherwise his memory does not affect me at all.'

As he was bidden, Fulke Bracy did look at my face straight with his keen, searching grey vision. We were alone for the moment at the bend of a path—and my eyes unaccountably fell.

Oh shame! Yet I knew he was not thinking of any past Clair St. Leger at that moment of swift onrushing change of thought. Did he guess, too, that my flush revealed consciousness of the fact? In haste, I added: 'But as to Beau, I have sometimes a superstitious feeling that it is unlucky for people to laugh so much; that they are *fey*, as the Scotch say, and it bodes misfortune.'

'We will hope not,' replied my companion absently, as leaving the path we came out on the open hill-top of Hunter's Tor.

The sun was setting in widespread glory ; the outgoing of the evening was praising its Creator. Its sinking flame lit up the far moorlands, and the cultivated vale stretching below us,—the ‘ champaign country ’ around wild Dartmoor. It brightened the stony hill-side of Whidden Park, with its strong-growing Scotch firs and great white-boled beeches. It lit up the whole land with one of those gleams of transcendent, but as evanescent loveliness, that seem sent from another world.

‘ There is your cottage down yonder, Bracy,’ exclaimed Beau ; who, intoxicated with his own high spirits and artistic delight in the beauty of the scene, sprang on and on from grassy ridge to rock of the steep tor that here overlooked the junction of the gorge and wider vale. ‘ Come, as your house is the nearest

here, we ought to draw you for hospitality.' Prophetic words, could he but have known it !

'Come back, Beau. Take care, Brown !' called both Bob and Fulke Bracy in warning tones. 'The grass is burnt as slippery as ice there. We know Hunter's Tor well. . .'

'Why, do you both suppose I can't take care of myself?' came back the jeering answer; disregarding a slow-sounding piece of advice just begun by John Gladman, who had only now realized his guest's danger.

I can see Beau still ! The handsome figure outlined against the sky, dressed artist-like in a light, easy-fitting summer suit ; a straw hat of strange Bohemian shape on that handsome head which any mother's eye must have fondly admired.

A moment or two I saw him, so ; then—he disappeared ! . . .

There was a wild cry ; but it came from us all, not from him. We rushed forward, reckless of danger, to gaze over the edge of the steep slope, where, down below sheer rock and outcropping bushes that yet could not give him friendly aid, lay—a something !

‘ Will he live ? ’ we asked the doctor some hours later, with hushed breath and fearful faces.

‘ Yes ; at least we may hope so, with great care. But still there is terrible injury : poor fellow, poor fellow ! ’

We were in the Artist’s Cottage, to which they had carried him as the nearest shelter : Fulke Bracy’s home. And poor Beau, so little while ago, had laughingly claimed its hospitality !

## CHAPTER XI.

NOW we felt poor, indeed.

Beau, our unhappy brother, was lying incapable of being moved for weeks, it might be months to come ; and he was under Mr. Bracy's roof. Under the roof of the man we seemed thus to have twice dispossessed, once at Stoke, now here again. He had generously given up the little cottage entirely to my mother and to Bob, who was, could it be believed ? the most useful, gentlest-handed of men-nurses.

Each day, by turns, Rose and I spent hours watching by the sick-bed in the

darkened room. At night, my mother drove us away, almost fiercely, to Wheatfield Farm, when we begged to stay and share her toils. We were young and wanted sleep, she said ; nothing hurt her—she had little to live for, now. In truth, with the strange selfishness of love, she could not bear sharing the care of her idol with any others.

A fortnight had gone like a dream. So many slow leaden days ; and yet this evening, thinking back, it seemed but yesterday we had come up the gorge. I could smell the heather again ; see the sunset !

Rose and I were sitting close together in a little study at Wheatfield Farm. It only looked out on the homely back premises ; out-houses with brown thatched roofs, a little courtyard where strayed some clucking hens with their tender broods. A heavy shower

fell fast ; but what did the view matter to us ? We had come here to be undisturbed, and were looking sadly at each other.

‘ A cripple for life ! always on his back. How terrible for him !—poor, poor Beau ! ’ I murmured, repeating the dread fiat of the two, best west-country doctors we had sent for, regardless of expense.

‘ It is dreadful for all of us. The Cottage is so tiny, only barely room for three persons in it ; yet Beau cannot be moved, they say, for months,’ said Rose, knitting her brows together in the endeavour to be firm and practical,—our dear little housekeeper ; but looking to me as a master-spirit to shape our future plans, which she would carry out.

‘ Oh, Pleasance, what shall we do ? ’

‘ We will get rid of the “ Dusthole,” ’ said I, meaning the little London house that had

never been 'home' for a day ; then, desperately : ' And we *must* pay Mr. Bracy what rent we can, no matter what he so kindly says ! Then, let one of us stay with mother, and the other one go elsewhere, out into the world. Alice is fond of you still, Rose ; she will never more ask me.' To my surprise, the tears came up in Rose's eyes, that were usually as bright-brown as a berry.

' Anything but that ; ask me anything else, dear Pleasance : I'll do whatever you tell me ; I'll be a nursery-governess, or even a *house-maid*. It was such slavery last year ! I never told any one, for as we are so poor I knew it was right to stay, but '—in a lower voice—  
' Alice was so angry with me about Sir John Dudgeon. You remember him at Broadhams. The Golden Calf, we called him ; a rich fool.'

‘And you refused him, is that it? Come; tell me, Rose?’

‘Yes; of course. But it was not because I said no, but because *he had asked me*,’ explained Rose, dropping her voice and speaking very fast. ‘You see she likes him so much; and oh! I wish people did not hint and laugh about her.’

My own story almost repeated. Would it always be so, to the end, with Alice,—poor Alice!—once ours. But she had indeed passed far out of the humble circle of our lives. It might be we should never more come together; never, at least, as we once had been.

‘Dear child; dear Rose! And we did not guess you had this to bear.’

‘Oh, what did it matter, you had far worse; and you never said a word after that time at

Broadhams. That helped me, when I remembered it,' said my little sister bravely.

At this we drew close together and comforted each other. The rain still came down.

'We can't *both* stay on here,' murmured Rose. Then, with apparent effort, she went on. 'But Mrs. Gladman always expected you for a long, long visit; so send me to the Cottage; I'll—I'll promise not to come up here too often.' Whereupon, to my great surprise, she burst out sobbing.

Now what did this mean?

'Rose,' I cried, 'do you think—tell me honestly, dear, as between sisters! no other living soul shall know of it—do you think you will see less of *him* down there at the Cottage than up here? Is that it?'

'Oh, what is the use of talking about me? You like him, and his mother wants it: and

you know you will marry him some day,' uttered Rose with a little desperate cry.

'His mother—whom do you mean?' I exclaimed, a new light breaking in on me.

'I mean John Gladman, of course.'

At the great sense of relief her words gave me, I burst out laughing, from pure nervousness. My sister looked at me utterly astonished. Then she saw there was no unkindness meant.

'Oh, Rose, Rose; and I thought it was Fulke Bracy all the time!'

'Well, then, you were blind. Why, we were only great friends, because he told me a little; and I guessed more about you and himself. Oh dear, I did so hope you would change your mind, Pleasance.'

Whereat we two once more drew close, this time even closer together; and long-repressed

mutual confidences were eased from our hearts like a load.

‘Remember, I don’t *know* if he is still of the same mind?’ said Rose. ‘Dear me, who is that calling?’

‘Rose, Rose, my pet, will you come and help me to cover the pots of blackberry jam?’ said Mrs. Gladman, putting in her kindly face at the door a moment. ‘What, Pleasance, are you offering, too? No, no, dear child, I only want one of my daughters, really; so I shall carry off my useful Martha, and Mary is to sit still there till presently I come to rest, and then she is to talk to me.’

## CHAPTER XII.

THEY had both gone and left me alone.

I sat with my hands lightly folded in my lap, and thought.

The rain-shower was almost over. The evening sun with one last glorious outburst lit up all the valley, and shone on the rough-paved courtyard and the thatched out-house roofs before me.

Have you ever watched a newly-thatched roof in the rain? how the myriad drops run pearly down it in thousands of crystal globes, each minute but distinct, while every straw-stalk holds a dewdrop at its tip! And

now with that ray of sun the wet eaves begin to gleam ; and now again, when the rainbow appears arching over the Fingle valley, each drop flashes back a ray of light till the whole thatched surface fairly glitters with diamonds. It is exquisite ; it is a poem.

So I thought, and a voice said behind me : ‘ Yes, how different from a commonplace slated roof, down which the rain pours in a dismal, even, grey stream.’

I started. Fulke Bracy stood behind me, his eyes having been quietly following the direction of mine. ‘ Have I frightened you ? —I am so sorry ;’ he went on, ‘ only guessing what you were watching I could not resist looking too, a moment ; before saying what I have come to speak to you about.’

How well he always knew what was passing in my mind ; and indeed he never startled

me—we were too much in sympathy for that.

‘ You have something to say to me, Mr. Bracy ? I am so glad you have come ; for I wanted to speak to you, too. For these last two days I have wished to talk to you about the Cottage, but you have always avoided me.’

‘ Not avoided *you*,’ returned Bracy quickly, meeting my grateful eyes, and turning his away.

‘ May I speak first ? Your grand-aunt has been telling me to-day that she feels unwell, and is pining for home. Now I don’t wish to alarm you, but it seems to me that when she has this longing, the sooner she is taken back to the Barn the better.’

‘ Aunt Bee ! What ? Oh, you don’t think her really ill, do you, Mr. Bracy ? I have been uneasy myself, but . . .’

‘But, as I said before, you need not be frightened. Only she is really an old woman ; though she has almost taught us all to forget that. And—I do not think she ought to be allowed to go back alone.’

‘I see. You think I ought to go with her?’

My friend nodded.

‘And leave my mother and Beau?’ He silently nodded again ; then added :

‘Yes. They can do without you, but to her it may make all the difference to have you.’ Then seeing me pale and wistful at the new thoughts and fears thus opened up, he tried to give me consolation. Still, I had seen my old aunt drooping even before Beau’s terrible accident. That had withdrawn my attention from her. But if she who had hardly ever had an ache in her whole previous

life, and never flinched from our side in trouble, now owned to feeling ill, and wanted to creep away from us all to her lonely house, it meant that age and health must be going ill with the brave old lady.

‘Yes, yes ; I will go with her of course,’ I murmured. ‘She has devoted herself to us all her life, and now . . . But surely her own fireside, her old associations, will all revive her. Oh, they must ! dear old Aunt Bee ! When ought we to start, do you think, Mr. Bracy ? Please advise me.’

‘If you are not too hurried, I think we ought to leave to-morrow. You know Miss Beaumanoir’s restless ways. She has often started on her travels at a few hours’ notice.’

‘*We ?* what do you mean, Mr. Bracy ?’ as some inkling of his intention dawned on my mind.

‘That I am going with you. It is too much for you to have such a charge alone, if your grand-aunt were to get ill by the way; and she is my oldest friend.’ Almost a cry came from my lips in thankfulness at the idea, looking up in his friendly, kind face. ‘It is too good of you,—it is too good!’ I found myself repeating, all the thoughts and words in my brain being so crowded that only small and worthless ones could escape. ‘And for us, who have turned you out of house and home! Oh, Mr. Bracy, you know we will gladly repay you all we can, but we can never give you enough *gratitude*.’

‘Pleasance!—gratitude!’

The man I loved looked full at me, the evening sun lighting up his features, that were handsome enough in the eyes of all the world, but to me were now the most beau

tiful ever seen. He spoke in a full, deep voice, with one of those vibrations of strong feeling only heard a few times in one's whole life.

‘Let that word be banished henceforth and for evermore between you and me. But for the fear that mere gratitude might move you, which God forbid, I had come here this evening to ask you once more—’

The door-handle turned, and my good god-mother appeared, smiling, with Rose in the background.

‘Well, dear Pleasance, Martha has made herself useful ; and it is Mary's turn to come to the parlour and tell us all manner of pleasant and pretty things.’ Then, as her eyes fell on our faces, and she must have read the arrested interest there :

But I beg your pardon. You were both

busy ; talking business together about the Cottage, no doubt. Yes, yes ; I know, Mr. Fulke, how anxious this sweet, foolish girl is, not to be beholden to you for the least thing. She is too proud ; far too proud.’ So my good god-mother rambled on, making mischief unawares, whilst I felt in agony, powerless to stop her. She ended : ‘ Well ; we will leave you now, unless indeed I can be of any help as a go-between in your little money matters ; the rent or—’

‘ No, no ; thank you, Mrs. Gladman,’ exclaimed poor Fulke ; rising directly, in an agony at the idea of our occupation of his cottage being regarded in the light of a business transaction ; we so poor ; he, by comparison, so rich.

‘ I had quite finished all I had to say to Miss Brown ; all of any importance, at

least. If you are going back to the parlour let us go too.'

Mrs. Gladman of course acquiesced, but looked at us with puzzled kindness. She had seen we were in difficulties of some sort, and supposed it *must* be the mere awkwardness of discussing pounds, shillings, and pence, between friends: hence her attempt to set us at ease.

So my interview with Mr. Bracy was over, and—*what had he meant to ask?* Should I ever know? Perhaps not, perhaps not! Such words once arrested may happen never again to be spoken.

## CHAPTER XIII.

I TOOK my grand aunt, therefore, back to her home.

It was a strange journey : for she insisted on returning in the old gig, now mended again. For one-and-thirty years she had driven in it, and it should carry her till she died, she said. So this time, I drove old Lazybones, and it was Mr. Bracy who rode beside us on Bob's horse, Dandelion.

Truly my friend had been right in saying that I should need his help in my task ; for though on starting Aunt Bee revived into almost her old vivacity, as we drove away in the fresh morning air, and that she waved

a farewell cheerily to those at the Farm gate who looked after us, it was only a momentary spark of brightness.

At the first hill-crest, she looked back into the pleasant valley with a little sigh; seeing the brown buildings of Wheatfield Farm embosomed in trees; and half a mile away, where the beautiful gorge opened, a white speck that was the Artist's Cottage.

‘Well, we had all a pleasant time—while it lasted,’ she murmured to herself, not sadly, but with a certain contented resignation, like a fairly happy old Epicurean.

Then she let her head sink on her chest, and altogether collapsed into seeming much smaller and more withered than ever before.

All our long day's journey, she never roused from her apathy or apparent stupor as we drove up hill and down dale, only

resting at mid-day: and I watched her anxiously, and Fulke Bracy watched us both. He never spoke to me, or hinted again, of that interrupted subject; but indeed on this journey he could not, even if he would.

By evening, we came in sight of well-known landmarks,—soon of more familiar objects. Seeing these, my Aunt Bee began to sit up, to my great relief.

Was this indeed the rack-rent, forlorn demesne I once knew? Trim meadows, well-ploughed fields, sound gates, and good fences; such was now Bob's Farm, as we skirted it. Our dear March Hare seemed to have a lucky hand, all had so prospered. And as we drove through the once tumble-down gateway and roofless lodge, now a pretty entrance by the brawling river, where no longer straggling branches of neglected

trees and underwood whipped our faces, the old lady looked as keenly around as in her good days. The old house with its ruins still looked, truly, far more worthy of being called the Barn than the Baron's Stay. Nevertheless the inhabited portion showed signs of care, too, in fresh paint on doors and gable-ends, in nailed-up creepers; and then—to her it was home.

Out ran a maid to the door, as we stopped.

‘Where is Tozer, to help me down?’ asked Miss Beaumanoir sharply, looking round as if with a presentiment of evil, on missing her shabby factotum. There was a silence. Then came the faltering news that old Tozer had been taken ill the night before; he had fallen in a fit, and was not expected to last long.

Mr. Bracy took my grand-aunt's arm to support her, as standing on the doorstep she heard this news. His eyes, meeting mine, told how he understood my anxiety on her account.

The old lady stood quite still for a few moments; then she only said, 'Like mistress, like man!'—and went steadily into the dark-wainscoted hall.

That night, after as strangely nondescript a supper as was usual at the Barn, we three gathered round the wide stone fire-place, which Fulke Bracy heaped high with logs, stirring up a cheerful blaze, otherwise the dark, musty-smelling room would have seemed dismal that night. He offered to play backgammon with my grand-aunt kindly; but she preferred to sit crouched over the fire warming herself. Presently she said, breaking a silence:

‘Poor Tozer! . . . you were both surprised I could take my old servant’s coming death so quietly, but to me it seems all for the best. Perhaps, had he lived longer, I ought to have looked more into his accounts and all my affairs—for Bob’s sake. . . . Well, well, he was faithful to me in his own way for many years. If he robbed me, as I have often thought, he knew well enough I never cared for mere money. Nobody is wholly good or utterly bad, I believe; and he would have laid down his life for his old mistress . . . all for the best, after all.’

After this, as neither of us dreamt of uttering a dissentient syllable, she strayed into old-world stories of her youth.

My attention wandered once or twice, I must own; perhaps it crept after my gaze that looked furtively at Fulke Bracy’s hand-

some head thrown into full relief by the pale, old Chinese screen behind him. The flickering flame-spurts showed his eyes kindly watching the old woman's face; his whole bearing one of unflagging interest and sympathy. Once or twice, only, came a quick full glance *at me*, as instantly turned away.

Oh, I knew what was in his mind! His old friend of years was failing, therefore he redoubled his almost filial devotion, and denied himself even one stray thought whilst he still could give her pleasure. How good he was! how kind; what a perfect friend!

All day, not a syllable of thanks to him had crossed my lips, for my grand-aunt was always beside me. Yet how I should ever have brought her safely home without his active help and gentle care, surpassing that

of a woman, heaven knows ! The very sight of him riding beside us cheered both our spirits.

I roused from reverie to find my aunt saying : ‘ Well, somehow, I always have a fancy that money will still be found ; sooner or later, Bracy.’

‘ I trust so . . . but is it not getting rather late ?’ answered Fulke, with a covert glance at me, who understood the warning.

As we said good night, I tried to *look* my thanks just for once. But, the instant the true man’s eyes above met mine, my gaze grew confused, and I looked down. My grand-aunt was beside us.

‘ Give me your arm up-stairs, Pleasance,’ said she. It was the first time in her life, the first time even this day she had asked help.

Once in her room, she turned upon me as keenly and quizzically as she would have done ten years ago.

‘Look me straight in the face, child! What is there now between you and Bracy?’

‘What is there?—why, friendship, of course,’ was my weakly evasive answer, trying my best not to meet those piercing, old, black eyes.

‘Friendship—fudge! Does he mean to marry Rose or not?’

‘What he may mean, he knows best himself; but Rose does not mean to marry him.’

The old lady drew a long breath not unlike a whistle, in its expression of meaning. ‘I begin to believe you were all at cross-purposes down at Wheatfield Farm, and that certain young people are geese.’

‘I think so too. I always was called a goose when I was a child,’ was the meek answer she received.

‘Yes, you are a dear little goose. Good night, Pleasance: sleep sound, my child. I am very much pleased with you.’

## CHAPTER XIV.

NEXT morning, we all three met at breakfast as early as usual; and that meant with my grand-aunt desperately early.

Mr. Bracy and myself, degenerate younger mortals, only just scrambled down in time; whilst Aunt Bee had already been out and about the premises.

‘Open the window, please,’ she said presently. ‘Close air always oppresses me: I should have been an Arab.’

I did as she wished, but in my own mind thought the moist autumn air that entered was heavy with the odours of decaying leaves.

In what was now a trim garden, outside the windows, dying spikes of summer flowers stood sadly up, or yellowing masses of nasturtium lay dying together.

‘Heavily hangs the hollyhock,  
Heavily hangs the tiger-lily.’

Autumn, in a garden, is to me the saddest time of the year. Oh, to be up on the moors then, when the heather is still alive in all its beauty, purpling the hills in violet sweeps for miles and miles!—and one feels invigorated in the strong west wind that carries with it the scent of the leagues of gorse across which it has blown.

So I said; and Fulke Bracy heartily agreed with me, against my grand-aunt, who defended her beloved low-lying woods around the Baron’s Stay.

‘Stoke is the only place surrounded by

forest land, where I never felt the oppression of dying vegetation,' he said.

'Ah! at Stoke, no; but then it lies so high, and all the air is so crisp and clear,' I was eagerly joining in, our eyes meeting gladly at last with full understanding.

'When you two once begin to rave about that old home of yours, both, it is time for me to go away. I'll leave you to rhapsodize together,' interrupted my grand-aunt, rising with an air of haste,—the crafty old lady.

'No, no, don't go away, Aunt Bee; or, if you must go, I have to be busy, too, writing letters.'

Her secret wish to leave me alone with Fulke was so plain to myself, I felt as if he must guess it too; and in confusion I turned to the great escritoire, the same rare old piece of furniture that had always been called my

especial legacy by my grand-aunt, and of which indeed I kept the key. Why would my face burn so with a quick foolish blush?

‘What a perfect piece of middle-age workmanship that is!’ said my old friend, Mr. Fulke, kindly pretending to believe I had bent my head to admire the exquisite inlaid flowers on the door-panels before me. ‘Do you know, that often as I have admired this treasure of yours, the inside has always been a forbidden sight. Miss Beaumanoir has always said it was your especial property ever since you were a child, and would allow no one else to open it.’

‘Show it to him now, Pleasance,’ directed my grand-aunt, who stood bent witch-like beside us, uncertain whether to go or stay, but herself feeling the childish curiosity of an old person in any sight not seen for some years.

This is how the strangest event in my life came simply to pass.

So I opened wide the inlaid doors, and showed with pride the interior ; all the drawers and pigeon-holes were as finely inlaid as the outside, with carved edges. They surrounded a miniature temple with pillars, mirrors, a mosaic floor, and swinging lamps. The central object in this shrine was a tiny Cupid, exquisitely carved in ivory, poised in a niche, facing us.

‘How charming ! I have only seen one that equalled it, and that was in Ghent, years ago, when a great Burgomaster’s heirlooms were sold. What do you keep in there behind the rail, where only the high priestess of this little god may look ?’ said Bracy, smiling at me.

I did not understand him. What secret

drawers I knew, in my cherished possession, had already been displayed with pride.

‘That one of the Burgomaster’s had a still more hidden chamber at the back, I remember. This bureau may not possess it, of course; still they are very much alike in other details. May I try?’

He pressed one of the squares of alternate ebony and ivory with which the mimic temple floor was inlaid; and lo! to our astonishment, the whole central niche and Cupid at once receded sideways, disclosing a cavity, inside which lay, unseen by any eyes for years, a small roll of what seemed old and yellowed thin papers.

A cry burst from us all three in our surprise. But the most excited of us was my grand-aunt, who quite gasped out:

‘Bracy! Bracy! do you see?—Can it

be?’ She bent forward, and with her own withered hands lifted out and unfolded tremblingly the bundle; then in a tone that thrilled through us, exclaimed, ‘*It is the money!*—the whole of my fortune, twenty thousand, in Bank of England notes, just as I gave it to my brother, the day before this house was burnt, fifty-three years ago. . . Oh, I knew it was not lost; I always felt so, though I had no more reason than a mad-woman. . .’ She paused, still striving for breath. ‘And to think it was *here* all the time!’ Her figure swayed slightly; she clutched at my arm for support. Fulke Bracy caught her quickly before worse could happen, and gently laid her down in an arm-chair quite unconscious. ‘Send for the doctor,’ he hurriedly whispered to me; and though he would not say a word then that would have

alarmed me more, I knew the same thought was in his mind as in mine, that this money might have come too late—for my dear old grand-aunt.

## CHAPTER XV.

IN the afternoon of that day, my Aunt Bee sent for me.

She was sitting now, I was thankful to see, bolt upright in her usual straight-backed chair in her own sitting-room. This was a strange den, so dark, dusty, and massed with books and papers, sacredly barred from a housemaid's sacrilegious touch, it might have been supposed Faust's study; though in fact these were only the accidental accumulations of thirty-one years' unstudious 'meaning-to-read-them-some-day,' ways of the old lady. Hung on the walls were Eastern tapestries,

Japanese armour, and curios enough to stock a small museum, all relics of travel; whilst mixed with these were various farm implements, such as new-fangled hoes, and spades bought on trial at Agricultural Shows; and tables and bureaus groaned with bottles of cow-medicine and books on farriery.

‘Sit down there opposite me, Pleasance,’ said the old lady with a sharp nod, and a satisfied gleam in the dark caverns of her eyes. ‘So you sent for the doctor, to-day, little goose! as if he could do me any good. I’ve doctored myself all my life; and who could have had better health, tell me that?’ Then, as I tried to justify myself, she waved her hand, and said, closing her eyelids rather wearily for a second or two—‘I know, I know; it was right for you to do so, of course. But I did better: I sent for my lawyer, and he

has been here with me for the last two hours. The notes are perfectly good, he says ; their identity cannot be possibly disputed, so now you will be an heiress, dear.'

'I!—how?—what do you mean?' I stammered, confused.

'I made my will to-day, leaving the Barn to Bob, and this money to you, child ; so consider it your own this minute. Take it, and do what you like with it. What is money to me?'

What broken, astonished words of gratitude, of representation and thankful dissuasion, I uttered, is more than my memory can repeat. Only my grand-aunt ended them all, I remember (only too well), by rising and holding out her hand for me to support her steps that tottered this day for the first time.

'Give me your young arm, and take me

up-stairs,' she said, smiling; 'I am my own doctor, and mean to go to bed now, and sleep a long time.'

So I helped her up-stairs and into bed; and recollect well how the sun was just sinking redly through the yellowing damp woods, and gleaming on the hurrying brown water of the little river.

'Now good night, dear, and don't disturb me till morning,' said my dear grand-aunt. 'Sleep is what I want, sleep is best for me. I never used to feel tired, but now I feel a very tired old woman. Good night.'

Down-stairs, Fulke Bracy and I dined alone together that evening; and together afterwards looked out of the curtainless parlour windows in the starry autumn night. We spoke in hushed whispers of the strange events of that day. Was I right when it

struck me my best friend's manner had somehow changed as he offered his congratulations on my being 'an heiress' ? Somehow, —imperceptibly, with a shade of manner too delicate to express in words ; yet sympathy made me feel *he* felt as if my sudden fortune had pushed us a little apart. And we had drawn so near, so near to each other in the last two days !

Moment by moment, this feeling grew on me as we stood in thought-weighted spaces of silence beside one another ; only broken by an occasional word from either of us about my grand-aunt, or those we had left at Dartmoor. My brain grew so troubled, I lost all control over my own thoughts, and only tortured myself trying to fathom and combat those of the man beside me. *If* he thought . . .

The twilight was darkening ; we stood

alone in the window. The silence that was so troubled might have been so sweet.

And yet I knew that this silent human soul beside me had loved me long, loved me so lately—surely, surely, despite my strange fortune discovered that morning—loved me still!

*If* he thought that roll of faded notes need separate us by an inch, oh! I would gladly have torn them then and there into little pieces, and flung them out of the window for the west night wind to carry them into the hurrying brook, or whirl them through the dying woods to play hide-and-seek with the fallen leaves. And so it was, I cried out with sudden impulse, that brought a sound like a sob from my throat.

‘I don’t want this money. I will not take it. Let Bob have it to improve the Barn with it, and make a home here for us all.’

Fulke Bracy turned now, and looked at me full. There was a gleam lighting up his good grey eyes, and a smile began dawning round the corners of his mouth.

‘ But Miss Beaumanoir wished *you* to have it—does that go for nothing? Besides, the Barn is improving itself, simply by being taken care of, after years of neglect and sheer barefaced robbery. Your grand-aunt knows that; and that Bob and I will make a fair income out of it (for I have my small share in your family fortunes, remember). Your brother may marry, too, and your home here would then be lost.’

‘ Then let the others have it.’

‘ You must remember that poor Beau will want very little now, and may not even want that little long,’ returned Bracy very gently; then with his voice brightening to a cheer-

fuller suggestion: 'As to Rose, don't you think that she also may find a comfortable and happy home of her own; perhaps, not far from Wheatfield Farm? Your mother?—yes; but what is yours would be hers, for all needful purposes while she lives. I thought your grand-aunt was right, Pleasance; for she told me this afternoon of her intention and wishes.' The last word was spoken so small I could hardly hear it, though Fulke was standing now quite close, and looking at last long and earnestly in my face. It was growing so dark, what could he see there?

Frightened now at what I had wished for, made happy in my secret heart when he said '*Pleasance*' once more, in a slow, lingering tone, as if he loved the name, I yet still objected faintly, though trembling, not knowing why. 'If you think so, it must

be right for me to keep it. But it will give me no pleasure.'

'My dear child, you might buy back Stoke.'

The words were softly spoken, yet with a playful touch of banter meant to show Pleasance Brown what pleasant prospect those odious bank notes opened up.

I stamped my foot, and cried almost with tears of rage.

'Yes; buy Stoke indeed, and live there! after knowing that you have been longing for the old home all these years; after Beau refusing it to you when you *could* have bought it; after my asking you to help Bob, so that you sunk half your hard-won savings in this farm and demesne. Heaven bless you for your goodness! And now when we—or, no, no, rather our unlucky fortunes—

make us turn you even out of your Dartmoor cottage that you loved, because your mother died there, you *think* I could live happily at Stoke!’ . . . My sobs followed fast at his doing me the injustice of supposing me so ungenerous; and through hot, thick tears, these words only made themselves intelligible. ‘Never! much as I love it! For your sake, I could not do that.’

‘My dear Pleasance! Remember that there is the old home to be had, but that I cannot afford—just yet—to have it.’

‘Then take it from me. Let me help you. You helped Bob: it is only fair. He will repay you, and you will repay me. Yes, yes: say you will! *you must!*’

‘Pleasance, darling!’

As I spoke in a flame of womanly love and excitement hot from my heart, Fulke

Bracy caught my hands, his man's soul on fire too. A flash in his eyes that lit his whole face, as I could see even in the twilight, answered the wet gleam in mine. And then what followed never can be rightly told, or even perhaps rightly remembered by me.

Only this, that he said—he declared—and made me believe as fully in his words as in gospel truth, *that if I would not live at Stoke without him, neither would he without me!*

What I felt, what I said, then what we both said and did, all seem now a vague dream, made sacred to mystery by happiness. We seemed only to be conscious that we two, we two were together—for always.

The twilight had become darkness, the stars shone out; but now as we stood still in the window the silence was sweet, the trouble all vanished.

At last hand unclasped hand, and I lifted my head from Fulke's broad shoulder, remembering my grand-aunt, and feeling she must not be neglected.

‘What will she say to this, I wonder? We two at Stoke!’

‘It was Miss Beaumanoir's own suggestion this very afternoon—there, don't start, dear. She knew my two great wishes, first to have you, then the old home, and said nothing could make her happier.’

We went softly up the black creaking stairs together, and I slipped into my grand-aunt's room. She was sleeping peacefully; breathing so low and regularly, it made me think of an aged child at rest, and such indeed she was in heart. So I came back gladly to tell Fulke, who waited outside, anxious about his old friend.

‘She is sleeping so well,’ I said.

‘That is good news, for us,’ he said in the kindly tone that came so straight from his heart, and warmed mine with fresh happiness only to hear him. ‘And now good night, Pleasance, my darling at last.’ As our lips met once more, and for the last time that night, I thought how happy the true old heart in there, who loved us both so dearly, would be when she knew that at last we two had come together.

She slept well, indeed, my dear old grand-aunt.

She slept so well that, though I stole in several times through the night to watch, there was no change in her peaceful breathing, or sign of pain on the features that seemed years younger, softened and ennobled by a

dreamy smile. And yet, when a new day dawned, she was no longer with us. It seemed as if, while her tired aged body rested, the soul had slipped out and away, free to undertake, it may be, a longer journey than even she who loved travelling best of all delights had ever dreamed ; free, at least, I for one doubt not, to enter into a new existence.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THE winter had been with us and was gone, and the time of the singing of birds had come. The dark, drear time of Nature was past; the time too of our mourning, and first bitterness of sorrow for the kindly, brave, old soul we should never see among us any more on earth.

Once more we were gathered together, down in the well-known valley, under breezy Dartmoor.

There in the pretty whitewashed cottage at the opening of the Fingle gorge, the sunshine and new life of the year had, alas! brought no fresh spring of health to our poor sufferer.

Sometimes, on a fine morning at the cottage, Beau was carried outside carefully on a couch. There he lay just able to look down the valley at the lovely scene, helpless, hopeless. It was all the movement he knew now ; he who had been so fond of change, of pleasure and society.

How my mother watched her darling first-born, her idolized son, with a jealous love so engrossing, that all care for the present, all sorrow for the past, seemed put aside out of her mind. He was all hers now—no one else could please him so well.

In former times, Beau used to be tempted so easily from the home-hearth that even at Stoke we hardly ever saw him ; though there only love, luxury, and admiration awaited the heir. He had roved still more gladly, alas ! from the mean little London

home,—though a mother's heart he knew was watching anxiously and lovingly for his step and voice. But now, the only being to whom his face turned, for whom his heart yearned, whether with need or from love of her, was that mother. It was sufficient to her, for as near an approach to happiness as her widowed heart could know.

One other person, indeed, waited upon Beau with a devotion which such handsome, selfish men do often strongly inspire in woman-kind. This was Amy Pawlett.

A bond of sympathy had seemed to link her and my mother to one another. What this might be, was an open secret to us women. But it was never spoken of openly among us ; and so John Gladman, and even Bob, dear fellow, who was constantly at the Cottage, both apparently

believed it was by mere chance that Amy had come back on a visit to the Farm.

How Amy came was this: Lady Pawlett had, it seemed, grown weary of taking her plain, simple-minded daughter out in society. The world would believe now she had tried to do her duty by both girls, and—owing to their own fault—had failed. She herself had gone off gaily with Alice to Nice for the winter, having, to the surprise of some of her acquaintances, established a fast alliance with the young sister-in-law, who had ousted her from being mistress at Broadhams. The arrangement pleased both; at least, for the time being.

Sir Dudley could say little about doubtful society, and improper, however delightful, amusements, when his pretty wife was accompanied everywhere by his sister; a matron

of such established fashionable virtue that all Lady Pawlett did, if not quite right, could hardly yet be wrong. (Indeed, she strained at a gnat, and could swallow a camel more unblushingly than any woman I ever knew.) And her Ladyship, feeling *passée*, was charmed to hunt, coupled with the lovely young Lady Digges; who attracted crowds of admirers and was the reigning belle of the Riviera that year. Our poor pretty Alice!

So Amy Pawlett had come to Wheatfield Farm. Hence, I hardly know how, she transferred herself by degrees, as it were, to the Artist's Cottage, where she had now wholly taken up her abode. She attended upon my mother like a daughter, at all times, with simple goodness; but as to happiness! she was gladdened all through her honest

soul whenever the invalid less often, and perhaps querulously enough, allowed her to wait upon him.

‘That is a good girl, a fine girl,’ said Bob to me privately each visit he paid. ‘She tells me she is training herself now to be a nurse some day, as her sister Charlotte went into a sisterhood. But she is too good for that sort of thing—isn’t she, Pleasance? you tell her so.’

Dear Bob! His heart was so with us all whom he loved, that he could not stay very long this Spring at the lonely Barn by himself, without coming over to see us for a day or two.

On his last visit, he and I went out together one glorious sunshiny morning, for a ramble ‘to remind us of old times.’ He had been talking again, quite enthusiastically

this time, of Amy's goodness, and beautiful daily devotion to both my mother and Beau.

‘In a stranger, you know ; that’s where the wonder of it is !’ said the good fellow simply. ‘And Beau is so thankless, too—I declare if she did half as much for me I’d, I’d ! . . well, I don’t know that I ever want to be married—not certainly for some years at any rate—but if I ever *did*, that’s the sort of honest girl would suit me for a wife.’

Not for some years, I repeated silently to myself. In some years the slender flame of life must have flickered out, that my mother and Amy strove so tenderly to keep alive by their ministrations. Who knew then, whether the words of our dear, foolish March Hare might not come true after all ; though women’s hearts and the ways of fate are equally impossible to foretell.

Our steps had strayed down a primrose hill, attracted (as was always a matter of course with us all!) by the musical ripple of the Teign. Here the river flowed shallow and silvern, babbling among roots and rocks. Birds were singing in the fresh green of the thorn brake behind us. Young lambs were bleating in the buttercup meadows, and the cuckoo was heard from the depths of the oak-wood. 'Isn't it perfectly jolly!' sighed Bob in ecstasy. 'But I say—why—what—you're not attending to me, Pleasance, but always looking about as if you wanted somebody. Oh, *I see*,' (as past some alder bushes a tweed shooting coat suddenly came in view, the wearer whereof was, as saith Izaak Walton, enjoying 'the most honest, ingenious, quiet, and harmless art of angling.')

'Hi, hi, Bracy! here is some one wants

you ; at least I know she doesn't want *me*, as she used, though she used to be glad enough to coax me out with her.'

'I like very much to be wanted in that way, even without the coaxing,' and Fulke smiled at me, looking very little older, and just as handsome as when I first saw him in my childhood's years, midmost of this very stream, some miles away up yonder by Gidleigh. It was where the trees overhead darkened the water, while boulders and steep hill-sides made the glen wildly impassable ; and I was prisoned on a rock in the pool. So I smiled back in his eyes, feeling, as when a child, that his was a godlike form to me, the handsomest, kindest of men ever seen or known.

We were leaning on a gate, leading into the meadow where John Gladman's great prize bull and beautiful cows, the pride of his heart

and the glory of the Shire, were grazing. On the other side of the hawthorn hedge voices approached us, singing together :

‘ Oh, I went to the fair with a heart all so merry ;  
Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee !  
And I bought a gay ribbon, as red as a cherry,  
For the girl I loved best, and who vowed to love me !  
I returned from the Fair, gaily whistling and singing,  
My true-lover’s knot I in triumph was bringing.’

At this juncture the man’s voice suddenly swelled louder, outsinging fairly the feminine treble, while, apparently delighted with his own cleverness, he triumphantly changed the refrain by one word ; shouting :

‘ But it was *now* for me that I heard the bells ringing,  
Sing, hey down, ho down, derry down dee !’

Away up the valley the bells of the grey moorstone church could be heard at that very moment merrily ringing. ‘ Practising for to-morrow,’ quoth Bob. ‘ Won’t they

ring up jolly well for this double wedding ! at least, I know I've promised them beer enough for them to be all drowned in it.'

Just then, as if to complete the scene, that only wanted her presence, came Mrs. Gladman. She was walking gently along the river's bank, from the direction of the Artist's Cottage ; an empty basket hung on her arm that had, no doubt, been full of delicacies made by her own hands.

We all turned to welcome that kindly, most motherly being, who always seemed chiefest among us all.

'How happy you all look ; that is just as it should be,' she said, smiling round upon us.

'Well ! *you* look just as happy,'—we all exclaimed in chorus, defying her to contradict us.

'So I am,' confessed the good woman, laughing as if half-ashamed of her own

beaming face. And then, coming aside to me, she whispered, putting her arm in mine :  
'Certainly, I had settled you four young people differently together in my own mind, but there !—You will be happier with Fulke, dear Pleasance, as I can see now for myself ; and Rose will be the best of little daughters to me, now that I cannot have you.'

Later again, there comes to me, like a waking dream, the remembrance of driving once more through the woods of Stoke, all green in their fresh spring bravery ; *driving home !*

The lake, lying still under the embosoming hills and woods, came in view, with the swans on its surface still floating double

'swan and shadow,'

as of old.

And there! there! was the old house at last, looking no whit changed; every window in its western gables glowing crimson, illumined by the setting sun in our honour—ours! Fulke and I silently turned and looked in each other's eyes with full understanding and gladness. Husband and wife, we sat side by side in the carriage.

At the porch we stopped, alighted, and there clasping hands by mute consent we two crossed once more the threshold of our dear old home in the West Countrie—we two together.

THE END.

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